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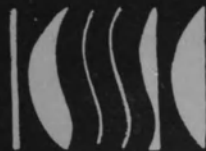
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# THE BINDERY WORKERS OF DAFTARIPARA

## 2. Their own life-stories

ASOK SEN

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~~Bindery workers of Daftaripara...~~

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THE / BINDERY WORKERS OF DAFTARIPARA

2. Their Own Life-stories

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## A B S T R A C T

This paper concludes the report on our case-study of the bindery workers in the Patwarbagan-Pataldanga locality (Calcutta Corporation Ward 37). The area is known as daftaripara for its age-old concentration of book and khata-binding activity. The first part of the report (Occasional Paper No.127), which was released in April 1991, gave an account of the workers in relation to the overall structural features of the binderies and other allied activities in daftaripara. This paper's collection of the life-stories provides a close view of the bindery workers, both men and women, in their socio-economic and cultural situations.



## THE BINDERY WORKERS OF DAFTARIPARA

### II. Their Own Life-stories

In an earlier description (Asok Sen, 'The Bindery Workers of Daftaripara: I. Forms and Fragments', Occasional Paper No.127, CSSSC, 1991. Hereafter OP 127) of the forms and conditions of bindery workers of daftaripara, we have made use of some structured information, general reports and also of some specific details which were available from sixty life-stories of individual workers and owners. The stories were narrated to us in Bengali by the subjects themselves. We present in this paper thirty-five stories in translation.

Most of the stories were obtained from workers and owner-workers. They were largely chosen from those in small and medium units. Large units are more homogeneous in respect of the terms and conditions of employment and their pattern of owner-worker relationship. While we obtained life-histories of some workers in large units as well, the main emphasis of this enquiry was on small and medium units, and particularly on those where owners also worked as direct labourers.

The evidence of the life-stories tells use of the cultural aspects of life as they bear upon the economic being of workers. The accounts present a close view of the working men and women in their specific social situations. We can see how the memories, desires, hopes and fears of those subjects revolve round their families, friends, jobs and an entire life style.

The descriptions which the workers offer of themselves constitute the realities of their lives. Moreover the range of experience, attitudes, reactions and levels of self-consciousness are expressed in the verbalization of the subjects. Let us then proceed to present the life-stories. We begin with the accounts of owners who are also direct labourers in their respective units.

(i) Owner-worker

Harendra Nath has a small ruling unit. He was firstly engaged as a ruling worker in 1955-56. Harendra came to Calcutta in 1948 from Chadra in Vikrampur, Dacca. He was then a boy of ten years. Harendra's father left earlier than his own elder brother who eventually came to West Bengal leaving all their property in charge of a Muslim farmer. None of them could ever return to their homeland. Harendra's elder brother and a brother-in-law (sister's husband) were the first among their close kins to be in Calcutta. He lived with them during his earliest days in Calcutta.

Harendra came to daftaripara for work in 1956, when he was aged about eighteen years. He tried to be a motor-mechanic before joining work in daftaripara. Earlier some efforts were made to set up a vegetable shop. This was the business undertaken by Harendra's elder brother who separated from the family after his marriage. Harendra read upto the primary stage (Class IV) in a corporation school. He could not continue his studies due to the pressing poverty of his family. Later, on the strength of his earnings, he provided that his younger brother could continue his studies.

He secured an M.Sc. degree. This brother is now a teacher of a higher secondary school. They share the same flat, though living with their families in separate households.

Harendra was introduced to a Muslim master workman (ostad karigar) who was from East Bengal. The husband of an elder sister of Harendra belonged to the native village of this workman. Someone from the house of this sister's father-in-law helped Harendra to come in contact with the master workman of daftaripara. Harendra gratefully recalls how this workman trained him in all parts of the ruling work. Harendra refers to him as 'my ostad' (i.e. my master).

The ruling activity appeared to have good prospects in those days. A run of one thousand slips in ruling would yield a return of eight annas. The amount was then sufficient for the purchase of one hilsa fish or a kilogram of rice. The same work now fetches an earning of two rupees which, on Harendra's own simple calculations, is insufficient for the purchase of any of those things. Harendra distinctly remembers that Muslim workmen made pretty good earnings in ruling during the late 1950's. All this attracted him to the particular field of work.

In the period before the 1960's, Harendra had a monthly earning of Rs.25. The master workman from East Bengal had monthly earnings of Rs.100 and could still draw nundis for Rs.75 to send remittances to his native place. Through the sixties and particularly after the 1964 communal riots, most Muslim workmen returned to East Pakistan (now Bangla Desh) selling out their units in daftaripara. They had already

acquired lands in their native places. Such lands were often those left by the Hindus who were displaced from East Bengal. Some Muslims shifted to other activities like tailoring.

In 1969, Harendra's master left for East Pakistan. He entrusted the full charge of his business to Harendra. He was given a six annas share in the gains of the unit. Harendra assumed full responsibility of the unit and it functioned quite well under his care and leadership. Let us state the events as narrated by Harendra.

I worked with my master Abu Ali from 1956 to 1969. He had a ruling workshop on contract. After the communal riot of 1964, Abu Ali gave me a share of his business. I got six annas share of what would be left after meeting the expenses. The master left for East Pakistan in 1964. The disturbed conditions made him apprehensive of being killed by rioters.

During his absence I fully looked after the ruling unit. He returned to Calcutta after nearly nine months when conditions improved. He went again to East Pakistan after a stay of about four months in Calcutta. In East Pakistan he started a hotel. I was a man of his confidence. The ruling unit was run by me. He told me that he was waiting for the success of his hotel business. I was assured that he would then hand over the ruling unit in daftaripara to me.

Abu Ali's hotel business failed. Returning to Calcutta, he took back the ruling unit from me. He had continuous quarrel with me. Nor could he properly run his own business. I decided to leave his unit. The landlord's attempt to evict Abu Ali from his workshop failed.



A son of the master came from East Pakistan to take charge of the unit. It was a complete failure and the son went back. The owner from whom the master had taken the workshop on contract took possession of the unit. All the old belongings and instruments were sold out. Abu Ali was then lying ill in East Pakistan. The unit would not meet with such a collapse if I remained in its charge. My master went back on his words to me and tried to place his son at the helm of the ruling workshop. I took care of my master and arranged for his treatment when he subsequently came to Calcutta in a state of illness. He died in Bangla Desh around 1978-79 at the age of seventy.

Towards the end of his life, Abu Ali married a Muslim girl of Jaynagar in South 24 Parganas. The girl's parents agreed as they believed that with his ruling unit Abu must have been a rich man. The master went for this marriage to help himself in acquiring Indian citizenship which never materialized. There was some tension and rivalry between Abu Ali and myself when I left his unit. Being continuously in the business, I enjoyed more confidence of the customers. This was a source of irritation for my master.

I set up my own ruling unit in 1969. I had this accommodation on lease which stipulated a monthly payment of Rs.200. The unit was previously owned by an East Bengal Muslim. He sold it to a rich Hindu 'hundi' dealer from whom I took lease. In the locality many units of former Muslim owners had been acquired by the Hindus without any payments. The former owners went to East Pakistan (now Bangla Desh) and could never return on account of passport/visa difficulties. When Abu Ali went to East Pakistan leaving me in charge of his unit in 1964, I was advised by many not to admit him again to

the workshop. I had no design for a breach of faith, not even during the war of 1965. Abu Ali faced no obstruction from my side. I set up my own unit.

Harendra started the work of his own unit in 1969. The present strength of his unit consists of four regular workers and Harendra himself. Two seasonal workers are usually added in times of peak demand. Harendra gives an account of his work schedule as follow :

I come to the workshop at eight in the morning. On an average I work for twelve hours each day upto eight in the evening. Some more time is required for keeping the accounts up to date. All this is completed by 9 P.M. and I usually return home by ten. I go home to have my lunch and a little rest. This takes about two hours. In the slack periods, I can return home by six in the evening.

There are three machines in my workshop. Each and every order has to be done strictly according to the design given by a customer. The work plan is always checked by me. Not that I don't commit errors. Whether a default is due to my mistake or that of the workers, I have to make amends for any valid complaints made by a customer.

My presence makes the workers more alert. This is true of all small workshops. The sudden absence of one or two workers creates severe difficulties. Our labour is our capital; the machines are of no value without labour. When a worker does not come to work for a longer period, I have to draw upon some daily workers of the locality to manage the supplies ordered by customers on time. All this increases my own burden of work.



One worker was in my unit from his boyhood. He worked for ten years with me and was having a monthly payment of Rs.450. Recently he got the offer for a job at the Tatas on a monthly salary of Rs.800. He did not even inform me before going for the new job. Not that I have no occasions to retrench a worker. But in such a case I always try my best to find an alternative for the worker elsewhere. The labour union is also informed. The CITU union of ruling workers is a strong body. The owners have also set up their association.

The story of Harendra Nath can be taken as one of moderate success. Through hard labour and perseverance over many years from the early age of eighteen Harendra has built up his own business which now yields a net earning of about Rs.2000/- a month. This represents the return on his joint work as a direct labourer, manager and supervisor. What he may gain as an owner is mixed up in his composite position. He was the member of a family displaced from East Bengal at the time of the country's partition. His father died in 1957. Harendra had then a monthly earning of Rs.90 with which he had to maintain his mother, a school going younger brother and himself. His mother died in 1959.

Harendra married in 1966. It was arranged by his maternal uncle and a brother-in-law (sister's husband). He looked after the education of his younger brother. This brother is now a school teacher. He lives with his family in a separate household. Harendra has a son and two daughters. After passing the Higher Secondary examination in the second division, the son now reads the degree course in Commerce. The elder daughter is in the final year of

Higher Secondary studies and the younger is due to sit for the Secondary school examination.

For a large part of his earlier life Harendra lived with his family in a slum. They are now resident in a flat, a part of which is occupied by his younger brother. The monthly rent of Rs.200/- is shared between the two brothers. Harendra and his family occupy two rooms, one big and a small one, and a covered verandah. They have a kitchen and a bathroom with provisions for water-supply. Their food expenses are moderate. The family has a fish-dish four days in a week, vegetable for three days and meat once in a month. Some provisions are made for daily consumption of milk. They buy rice, wheat and edible oil available in the ration shop.

The family has neither a T.V. set, nor a refrigerator. There is a radio which is not switched on during the time for studies of the students in the family. Harendra listens daily to the news broadcast and other programmes on Sundays. His observations regarding political loyalty, cultural life and recreation should be noted.

I have my night's meal by ten. Some time is then given to reading. There are about fifty books in my holding ranging from the history of the East Bengal Club to the life and adventures of Netaji. I read the daily newspaper 'Bartaman' and the party paper 'Deshahitaishi'. I like more to read books on history and politics. I go to sleep by 11-30 P.M. and wake up at six in the morning. I have my tea by seven. The next thing is to go for the daily purchases in the market. And then I am in my workshop by eight in the morning.

I support the CPI(M) party. I have been loyal to them since 1964. I am not a party-member. They are the party of the poor. I go to their meetings. It is not possible to be more involved in party work since that may disturb my work-schedule at the workshop.

I like those films which deal with the problems of social life. I have no opportunities of seeing theatre. The film 'Chota Bou' was liked by me, so was 'Guru Dakshina'. The latter was specially liked by me since it depicted how a man kept to his words in the past. The promise made to the zamindar was fully honoured. And once he received the sanction, the hero could sing again. Above all I appreciated the hero's hard labour and struggle to become a great singer.

Although I have no faith in the rituals of religious worship, I don't obstruct the Lakshmi and Saraswati Pujas by the women of my family. For about three years now, I have put a stop to Viswakarma Puja in my workshop. I have no faith in the religious stance of the Brahmins.

There were some friends in my younger days. I have lost all track of them. I passed my boyhood and youth in acute poverty and hardship. Money sustains friendship. One very close friend of mine is now a customs officer posted in North Bengal. We have lost contact with each other.

I have one or two very dependable workers. I believe in trusting people. This has proved rewarding through my life.

Bipin Das runs a bookbinding unit at Patwarbagan. There are four regular workers including Bipin, one of them a woman, one man and one child worker. Anila Chatterjee is the employed workperson of the unit. Bipin was born at his native place in Vikrampur, Dacca. They were a family of fishermen. His father never came to India and died in Vikrampur. One of his two brothers still lives in Bangla Desh. Another brother is in Calcutta. He is a fish-dealer. Bipin's uncle came earlier to Calcutta and settled in Jadavpur along with his family. He was also in fish business. The uncle died in 1973.

Bipin came to Calcutta in 1964 when he was aged about fourteen years. He had already read upto Class IX in a secondary school at his native place. Bipin could not continue his studies in Calcutta. He stayed with his uncle who provided for his food and lodging. A neighbour in Jadavpur worked in a bindery at Anthony Bagan. Bipin's uncle requested this man to find some work for his nephew. Bipin joined work four months after his coming to Calcutta. In the beginning for about six months he worked without any payments. His uncle paid him the bus fare and the tiffin expenses. This was followed by his work at Mahakali Binding where he received a monthly payment of Rs.65. The owner of this unit soon left to Bipin all responsibility for running the business. There was no fixed payment for the additional burden; it varied between Rs.50 and Rs.100 a month. Bipin never insisted on having larger payments. He thinks that the owner died before clearing an amount of Rs.1500 due to Bipin.



After the owner's death, his sons objected to some work being done in the unit on Bipin's own account. The arrangement had the approval of the deceased owner. For this purpose, Bipin rented a room which he used as his godown. He left the previous unit in reaction to the troubles created by the dead owner's sons.

Bipin decided to set up his own unit in the godown. His uncle helped him with Rs.5000 in getting the room on lease and for other initial expenses of establishing a separate workshop. The room still accommodates Bipin's bindery unit. The entire room had double the space now occupied by Bipin's unit. It was then in a dilapidated condition and a ruling machine was kept across the room. Bipin had the room on lease which he contracted for an advance of Rs.600 and a monthly rent of Rs.25.

The lessor was himself a lessee and passed no part of his receipts from Bipin to the actual landlord. One day he left after selling the ruling machine. The Muslim landlord agreed to allow Bipin to have possession of half of the room on payment of Rs.500. This landlord was a kind man and agreed to Bipin's offer of Rs.200. The room was repaired by the landlord at his cost. It was partitioned. Bipin's bookbinding unit is situated in one part. There is a printing press in the other part. Bipin pays a monthly rent of Rs.70 (inclusive of electricity charges). The Muslim landlord never troubled Bipin for any delay in rent payment. Moreover he also helped Bipin with money for the purchase of some necessary binding equipment.

Bipin has some experience of being cheated by his customers in the early phase of running his own unit. There are three hired workers in his unit, one child, a woman and a man. Bipin himself has to do very hard labour. His remarks about his workers are significant.

I am to depend on them. The situation may be different in a large workshop. I have one very poor child worker. She is a girl and cannot yet do proper work. Still I cannot throw her out. She is so poor! It is not for me to dismiss a worker. There is hardly any distinction between the owner and workers in my unit, I do work as much as they do, or even more. I have the additional responsibility for securing orders and for weakly payments on realization of dues from the customers. The workers always help me. They work beyond the scheduled hours to complete some work in hand. The workers are interested in improving my condition so that they can also have some benefits. I have the past experience of being let down by some workers. But no unit at my level of operation can work without faith in workers. To the extent that I depend on them, they are equally dependent on me.

Bipin still lives in his late uncle's house in Jadavpur. There are four rooms of which one is allotted to Bipin. The household has ten members, the widowed aunt, her mother and seven cousins (five sisters and two brothers) and Bipin himself. All these sisters have read upto the Higher Secondary stage or beyond. One is now in the B.A. class and another studying for the B.Ed. degree in the Rabindra Bharati University. One of the cousins (brothers) works in the State Bank, another yet to get any job after having the B.Com degree. The eldest daughter of Bipin's



uncle was married earlier when her father was alive. Her husband works in the telephones. Two more cousins (brothers) live outside Calcutta, one in Jalpaiguri doing timber business and the other working in a T.V. firm in Guwahati.

Bipin pays for the daily purchases of the household. He does the marketing every morning. This is Bipin's contribution to the household expenditure. He is unmarried. Bipin thinks it is just not possible to marry because of his extremely meagre earnings. Bipin's own account mentions other aspects of his life, experience, and daily routine.

I have my tiffin at the workshop. Most of the days I have a small share of the rice brought by Anila Chatterjee, the workperson of my unit. On days when Anila is absent, I buy ruri (parched rice) of fifty paisa for my tiffin.

Politics has no attraction for me. In the mid-sixties I came in close contact with some leaders of a left political party which is now a partner of the state government. They were bidi-smokers when I could be familiar with them. They now smoke cigarettes and take no cognizance of my poor self.

I had to spend about two years in lock-up and jail for binding a book released by the Naxalites. In those days of distress, I had some help only from Anila, the workperson of my unit. My cousins made occasional enquiries about me during my days in jail.

My mother came to Calcutta two years ago. She cannot stay in the house of my uncle. There is no accommodation. She lives by turn with my younger brother or in the family of my maternal cousins (sons of my mother's sister). The maximum

support that I can afford to offer her does not exceed Rs.100 a month.

Once I frequently went to cinemas and theatre. Now it is very rare. sometimes I listen to the transistor radio possessed by me. I find no time to read books.

I work on holidays. I come to my bindery and work alone. The holidays are propitious for arranging things at the workshop.

I reach my unit of work by 9-30 in the morning. Jainul, a child worker of the adjacent printing press opens the workshop. He keeps the keys. I go to sleep by eleven at night. I have no electric fans in my room. But even in the hottest summer days, I fall asleep the moment I go to bed. Thus I come to rest in the end of a day's hard labour. I wake up by 6-30 in the morning.

My only concern is to place my workshop in a position of some strength and resources.

The small unit of Bipin Das typifies the petty mode of processing as it exists in book-binding. Bipin's net earnings from the unit do not appear to exceed Rs.700 a month. This is a composite return for his labour, management and ownership. Bipin comes to the workshop even on holidays and works alone; he also attends what cannot be conveniently taken up on working days. His own account emphasizes the similarity of his position with that of a worker.

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Abdur Rahman is an old man of seventy-five. His native place is in East Bengal. His father died at the age of forty-five. Their family lived on the earnings from some agricultural lands. Abdur Rahman came to Calcutta with his maternal uncles who had binderies in daftaripara. It was 1923 and Abdur was just a boy of nine years. After a carefree life for some years he joined the bindery of his maternal uncle. He received no payments. His food and clothes were provided. It was as if Abdur was engaged in his own business.

When he was about twenty, Abdur joined work in the Ganges Printing. He did work in an automatic ruling machine. Abdur cannot remember what he used to earn in that job. He lost his job because of an altercation with his superior officer. An amount of Rs.700 was given to him at the time of dismissal. He married a girl in East Bengal while working in the Ganges Printing. His wife never came to Calcutta. Abdur went occasionally to his native place.

Abdur Rahman tells us of his early memories of this locality,

The bindery business was in good shape. It was entirely done by Muslims. They were mostly from East Bengal. Those days the Hindus had utter contempt for this work. They are now very much inclined to do work in binderies. The distinction between owners and workers was much more sharp. The working hours were from six in the morning to eight in the evening. It meant fourteen hours of stipulated work a day. At present, the workers are more insolent. Money earnings were not high. But workers could carry on fairly well at the lower costs of living which prevailed under the

British rule. During the thirties there was gaslight in this locality; the binderies used carbide and other brighter non-electric lamps like 'hajax' and 'petromax'. The roads were swept every morning and washed twice a day.

Abdur Rahaman also recalls his participation in the trade union movement for fixing an eight hours a day work schedule. Prabhabati Das Gupta was among their top leaders. Abdur was a worker in the Ganges Printing when he took active part in this movement.

I came to take part in the movement after working from ten to five in the Ganges. The bindery owners beat me up with the help of hired goondas. I still have a scar mark in my head. I did not hit back. It would be unbecoming of me as a labourer. They also offered me money suggesting that I should leave for my native place for several years. I did not oblige them.

Abdur set up his own unit after being dismissed from the Ganges Printing. He had to do a lot of hard work. The present room was rented after returning from his native place two years after the 1964 riots. During the communal riots of 1964, he was advised by a very close Hindu well-wisher to go to his native place. This man helped Abdur in many ways. Abdur pays a monthly rent of Rs.60 for the present accommodation.

Abdur Rahaman has five regular workers on a daily work basis. He usually employs two more workers in times of peak demand. He has always been a direct labourer. However, due to old age Abdur can do little work these days.

Ganges. The bindery owners beat me up with the help of hired goondas. I still have a scar mark in my head. I did not hit back. It would be unbecoming of me as a labourer. They also offered me money suggesting that I should leave for my native place for several years. I did not oblige them.



Abdur's unit does work for some leading publishers of the city. The quality of binding done in his unit has wide reputation. He does not cover in his account the details of his unit's earning. But the instances of his life experience indicate that the earnings from his medium size bindery must have been quite satisfactory. Let us cite some examples.

Abdur Rahaman looked after the education of his younger brother who had the Bachelor's Degree in law. As desired by his younger brother, Abdur also helped him to go to England where this brother was subsequently settled in legal practice.

Abdur has four daughters and a son. Three of his daughters are married. They live in Bangla Desh. Abdur states to have spent no less than seven thousand rupees for each of this marriage. His sons-in-law are fairly well-placed in life. The youngest daughter stays at home. She could not pass the school leaving examination. His only son lives on the agricultural lands in his native village. Abdur has added to the landed property left by his father. He regrets that the son could not pass the final school examination. Abdur had plans to send the son to England where his younger brother lives with his family.

Abdur Rahaman mentions the following in his life story.

I have no valid passport, I am a rare visitor to Bangla Desh. I contested against Government of India upto the Supreme Court for Indian citizenship. At my special request a leading Hindu barrister of national standing in his profession and politics took my brief at a reduced fee of Rs.500. He told

me that I would not get Indian citizenship, but a stay order might be released in my favour. I live in India on the strength of a Supreme Court stay order.

As regards his own state of present living, Abdur Rahaman tells us as follows.

I live in my workshop. No other accommodation has been rented. I have my food in a local eating house. A worker lives with me. The days when he cooks, I have my meal at the workshop. I am an addict of pan, cigarettes and tea.

I was a frequent viewer of films in the company of a close friend. This friend died a few years ago. It is now about two years that I have given up seeing films. I had many lessons from the cinema. The films were so nice those days. Those films prompted me to bear the burden of my brother's education. I could see that it was right to educate my brother. I gave almost nothing to my wife.

My monthly expenses are quite high. I cannot say what profits are made. My workers are well paid. I face no difficulties. I keep no strict accounts.

All my duties are over. The youngest daughter is yet to be married. This is my only unfinished task.

In connection with the court case I had to go to Delhi and stayed there for some days. I have never travelled to any other distant place.

I observe to the best of my ability the religious demands of ietra and zakat; qurbani is performed at my home in Bangla Desh.



I go to sleep by ten at night and wake up four in the morning. The day begins with my prayer (namaj) even before the formal call of ajan.

The bindery owners are fond of me. I am respected for my age and experience.

The life story of Abdur Rahaman may have a number of overstatements. The tenor of his account is not at all free from a lot of gabbling which can well be a characteristic of his old age. It is also the reflection of a varied and colourful life experienced by him. No less significant is the ambiguity of his citizenship. In an important sense, his long and eventful life spans through various stages of growth and decay of daftaripara. All this provides us with many relevant features of a bindery worker who rises from the position of an able and humble labourer to that of a fairly successful owner-worker of a bookbinding unit of lower medium size.

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Aziz Molla has a small book-binding unit. In times of peak demand he employs two to three workers. Otherwise he has one adult worker and a 'boy'. At the age of sixty Aziz is always a regular worker in his own unit.

Aziz Molla's native village is in Jaynagar, South 24 Parganas. His first job was that of a worker in the Ganges Printing. This is where he had his first training in binding work. During the riots of 1964 he left for his native village and lost the job in the Ganges Printing because of long absence.

Aziz has no memories of his parents who died when he was less than three years in age. He was brought up by his maternal uncles. They worked in agriculture. Aziz had a younger sister. He cannot remember who arranged her marriage. She went away to Bangla Desh with her husband some years after their marriage. Aziz got married while working in the Ganges Printing.

Aziz moved from one bindery to another after his dismissal from the Ganges Printing. He got a daily wage between four and five rupees. It was extremely difficult to meet all his expenses with such meagre earnings. He set up the present unit about twenty years ago. One old man ran an eating-house in this room. He could not maintain his business. Aziz took this room on a monthly payment of Rs.15 to that old man. He has now to pay rent directly to the landlord. The monthly rent is Rs.70.

Aziz's own account gives us an idea of the scale of work done in his unit.

In the beginning I worked on my own and could not accept any large **orders**. I now work for three or four known publishers. Some rebinding of old medical books is also undertaken. Usually, I have only one regular worker to help me. Three to four workers are temporarily employed in periods of more demand.

About a year ago I purchased one cutting and a stitching machine. Both were old and I paid Rs.7000 for the two machines. An amount of Rs.300 had to be paid to the broker. In addition to my own savings, I had to take loans from my customers on an advance payment basis.

All necessary repairs of the room have to be done by me. The landlord gives nothing. The extra earnings of the peak period are used for the upkeep of the unit. My household expenses are met from the more regular earnings through the year.

Having no children of my own, I have adopted a daughter of my brother-in-law. She lives with my wife. I do some spending for her education. A private tutor takes Rs.40 a month. I have to give Rs.50 for household expenses each week. In case of no pressure of work, I go to my native home once a week. Sometime I cannot go for weeks. My wife rears up poultry and goats with the intention of some earnings.

As regards his life in Calcutta, Aziz makes a few points.

I live with a worker in my workshop. When this worker is in the workshop, he cooks meals for both of us. Otherwise, I have my meals in an eating-house. It costs me about Rs.5 for two daily meals.

I do my best to observe the rituals of our religion regarding namaj. No gurbani is performed by me at the time of baqr id. I have no friends. I vote for Congress. I have no inclinations to take part in the day-to-day politics of any party. I am short of means for the proper maintenance of my family. How can I then go for political work? Nor do I have any education. I don't know agricultural work.

I like the freedom of an own account worker. No one can command me to do anything.

Aziz's brother-in-law (wife's brother) married a Hindu girl whom he subsequently deserted. This woman works in the binderies. She works at times in Aziz's unit as

well. The woman has two children by her husband. She lives with her daughter in a rented house at Mallikpur. Aziz Molla cannot take more care of this helpless woman. He does not have the means.

Aziz Molla is an owner-worker who passed a long period of work as a daily worker in binderies. His early labouring career in the organised sector was disrupted by events beyond his control. He gives the impression of being a person with few ambitions. The style of his life and work is characterized by containment in the small unit owned and operated by him.

\* \* \*

Dilip Saha is the owner of a ruling workshop. He had to start working as a child. Dilip has established his own unit after a long period of extreme toil and hardship. The market for ruling was quite good even in the early eighties. Its position has worsened because of the growth of offset printing. All work relating to diaries has been taken away from traditional ruling units. Some other ruling jobs have also met the same fate.

It was only six months after Dilip's birth that their family was displaced by communal riots from the village Baliadi in Dacca. His father was a tantrik medicine man. He was afflicted with the serious ailment of one of his patients. The patient was cured. Dilip's father died. The family of eight persons fell in great distress. Coming from their native place, they had occupied a room in Patwarbagan. After the death of Dilip's father, the local corporation councillor

arranged that Dilip's mother could take shelter in an orphanage with her four daughters and the youngest son.

Dilip and his elder brother started work. His own account is as follows :

We were employed in the units owned by Muslims. Our father was known in the locality. He aided people in curing their illness. They had sympathy for us. It was the help of those Muslims which kept us alive.

Though I was just a child worker, Sakluddin paid me Rs.15 a month from the very beginning. It increased to Rs.30 in five years. I worked for another five years in the unit of Arshad Ali who paid me Rs.35 a month in the beginning. The payment increased to Rs.90. Both of them left for Bangla Desh (then East Pakistan) when communal riots broke out in 1964. A Bengali Hindu took up the unit of Sakluddin. I worked with him for six months. My monthly pay was Rs. 105.

Two of us, my elder brother and myself, took a unit on lease. The owner worked in the railways. We gave him Rs.45 a month. I ran it for four years between 1964 and 1968. I was only seventeen in 1964. My brother left six months after we took the unit on lease. He decided to become a tantrik. The unit fetched me a monthly earning of Rs.500 to Rs.600. I gave up the lease after four years.

I rented a room just by the side of the previous unit. All this cost me Rs.2300 for the room and Rs.600 for the machine. I could meet this expenditure from the money which I saved while running the former unit on lease. Also an amount of Rs.3600 was spent by me for a sister's marriage in 1968.



In 1968, Dilip's mother returned from the orphanage with her youngest son. His sisters stayed at the orphanage for a few more years. His mother worked as a domestic helper in the house of a gentleman at Khardah. She worked for about eight years. Dilip arranged the marriage of two sisters. One sister's marriage was arranged by government. This occurred during their stay at the orphanage. The sister was married to a person who had a job in the Fort William. Another sister fell in love with a man who had agricultural lands. They were married.

Dilip bought about 3 cottahs of lands in Khardah at a price of 2300. He phased the construction of his own house over time. Dilip's elder brother is now a full-fledged tantrik living in Ballygunj. He has many followers who ensure his livelihood.

Dilip married in 1972. It was arranged by his uncles. His father-in-law gave his daughter a fair amount of ornaments. He had a cloth shop in Burrabazar. The shop is no longer in existence.

Dilip has two sons and a daughter. The daughter is the eldest and reads in Class VI. One son reads in Class III and the youngest in Class II. There are seven members in the family --- Dilip, his wife, three children, mother and a sister who is divorced by her husband. The weekly household expenses amount to Rs.300. On two days every week they eat fish, while on other days the food is vegetarian. Occasionally, they have meat. The monthly expenses for the private tutors of the children amount to Rs.135.



Dilip employs only one regular worker in the workshop. In case of heavier pressure of work he employs one or two temporary workers for a few days. We note below Dilip's reflections on the state of his business.

The market for ruling is badly spoiled by the incursion of offset printing. Our work can never attain their quality. Many units in our line are in severe distress. Some owners cannot even purchase their own lungis. We help them by raising funds in their aid.

There is at present only one machine in my unit. In 1982 I had to sell one machine due to lack of work. I have worked in this field for no less than thirty-five years. I cannot employ a regular workman because of insufficiency of means. I have to work very hard.

I am in this business for thirty-three years. I was a sagred for about six years. And then I became a workman. Where is all the work gone ? The helper to a mason has the daily wage of Rs.22/-; a workman in ruling gets Rs.21. This is no right reward for a skilled workman. The customers default in their payments. The ruling workers receive no regular payments. The handcart pullers and porters of this locality also suffer because of the decline in work caused by offset printing.

I leave my home by seven in the morning. My sagred lives in the workshop. He opens the unit. I do it myself when he is absent.

I know no other work. There is no scope for me to shift to any other work.

I don't see films. Music attracts me. We are devotees of the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswar. We have a family preceptor.

For me, the children's education has the highest priority. They must be in a position not to come to their father's line of work. They must not be uneducated like their father.

Dilip Saha's account presents the case of a person who was displaced from East Bengal after the country's partition and went through a long struggle for existence to some kind of settlement. Immediately after his birth Dilip's parents migrated to Calcutta. His working life started in a ruling unit of Patwarbagan when he was not even ten. This was followed by thirty years of unceasing labour with which he combined a keen sense of initiative and enterprise. He is now past forty. The life of toil and struggle continues.

He finds himself in utter despair because of the threat to ruling work. The threat comes from the growth of offset printing. The earnings from his own small unit are subject to wide fluctuations because of sharp variations in demand. The needs of his family can be met with a minimum income of Rs.2000 per month. His net earnings reach that level only in the busiest months. Dilip finds no alternative. He places all emphasis on the education of his sons who may then go for sources of earning which will be different from their father's lifelong engagement. Such are the implications of the new technology of offset printing for the owner-worker of a small ruling unit.

Abhoy Saha came from East Pakistan (now Bangla Desh) in 1962. His native village was Rudpur in Dacca. Their family had to leave their native land due to growing economic difficulties. All the property left by his grand-father was expended by Abhoy's father. His father did no work. Abhoy's uncle (his father's elder brother) left earlier for Calcutta. One of his sons is now working at Kidderpur dock and another is a cloth dealer in Kidderpur.

Abhoy was the second of his five brothers. They have three sisters; one was born after they had come to Calcutta. Their father did no work even after coming to Calcutta but for some petty vending, none of which lasted for any considerable period. Abhoy and his elder brother had to start working for the livelihood of their family. He worked just for his own food in a bindery. His elder brother was employed in a grocer's shop where he got his food and Rs.20 a month. All this was arranged by their maternal uncles.

The rent for their room at Muraripukur was paid out of the amount received by Abhoy's elder brother. His mother and sisters made cheap paper bags (thonga) for bare livelihood. The third brother also joined work in binderies. Two other brothers live in Baranasi. They do the work of painting and polishing. The eldest brother now works at a grocer's shop in Sodepur.

Two sisters have been married. The husband of one worked in a Dalmia factory which was eventually closed. He now runs a grocer's shop at his own house in Sodepur. The second sister is married to a person in Barrackpore. Her husband works in a ration-shop. Their parents live with the third son. The unmarried sister lives with Abhoy. It is about

fifteen years that they moved from Muraripukur to Sodepur. The eldest sister lived in Sodepur after her marriage. She persuaded her brothers and parents to move to Sodepur.

They stayed for some time in a rented house at Sodepur. Three cottahs of land were then purchased at Rs.1500. The amount was obtained by the surrender and encashment of a life insurance policy of their father. A building with five inches thick brick walls and tiled roof was constructed over time. There was one room in the beginning. Abhoy constructed the second room at the time of his marriage. The third brother constructed one more room when he married.

Abhoy married at the age of twenty-two. On holidays he went to a tailor's shop in Sodepur to meet his friends. This is where Abhoy was introduced to an elderly man who arranged his marriage. The girl's family was the immediate neighbour of this elderly man. Abhoy read upto Class II and so did the girl whom he married. He is now a father of two daughters, the elder aged six years, and the younger four years. They are engaged in studies.

Abhoy is aged thirty-four in 1989. He started work in 1965 at the age of ten. Let us then read Abhoy's account of his own work experience.

For the first year of my work in a bindery I was given only my food for each day. After working for one and half years I received a monthly payment of Rs.10. I left at a time when I was paid Rs.20 a month. For some days I worked for cash payments, and not for my daily meals in kind. My monthly earnings increased to Rs.75. I learnt all jobs of binding in one and half years. But earnings were not satisfactory notwithstanding a lot of movement from one



unit to another. For the last five years I have been functioning as a self-employed owner-worker. One room in Patwarbagan is occupied by me for binding work.

According to the rise and fall of demand, my monthly earnings fluctuate between Rs.400 and Rs.600. I work for about 12 hours a day. No work due to lack of orders is a frequent experience.

I leave my house in the morning by 8/30. I am here ready for work from ten in the morning. The day's work ends between eight and ten in the evening. On days, when I have work, it is done by me for at least twelve hours. I go to sleep at twelve in the night and wake up by seven in the morning.

I get orders for binding bill-books, cash memo, pad etc. Some small printing presses of the locality give me such orders. I do regular work for two presses of this kind. In lean periods I have to move in search of orders from the presses. They come on their own during the busy season.

I am my own owner. I can work in freedom. But the payment rates are very low. Also there is stiff competition. Some work was being done by me at the rate of Rs.1.40. I lose it because another person offers to do the same at a rate of 80 paise only. Can I have any plans for the future? A hard struggle goes on for mere subsistence. I am ready to be a slave of someone who promises me a bare subsistence. I need nothing for cinema-bioscope etc., merely food and clothes are enough!

I have four dependents in my family. In addition to the supplies from the ration shop, I have to purchase some amounts of rice in the open market. We live on just rice and pulses. It is

possible to spend more only in periods when I earn more. Usually on sundays I try to have some cheaper variety of fish. I had once been to Tarapith. I do not even know much of the city of Calcutta. For example, I have never been to the Alipur zoo. I have no close friends. I never go to a cinema at my own cost. I have had religious initiation from a preceptor in Naktala, Tollygunj.

Patwarbagan is a peaceful area. I have no political connection whatsoever. I don't even cast my vote in case some other work keeps me busy on a voting day.

There is very strict checking in the trains these days. And so I have to buy a monthly ticket costing Rs.36. All marketing for the household is done by me. As and when necessary, I make some purchases in Sealdah before catching the train for Sodepur.

Abhoy Saha emphasizes the plight of low earnings and uncertainty of work in the binderies. He has the experience of low wages as a hired worker. Abhoy finds no solution in self-employment. There is the chronic problem of irregular and inadequate orders. Perhaps, such experience explains his equivocal position regarding hired employment and self-employed work. Abhoy prefers his present state of freedom as a self-employed worker. Almost in the same breath he wishes to be a slave of anyone who may promise him regular subsistence.

Sakur Mia lives in a rented room in Patwarbagan. His father died in 1963 at the age of forty-six. Sakur's father had his own bindery which had to be sold out because of his illness. Sakur's family consists of his second wife, a daughter, widow mother and himself. The daughter is by his first wife who died about six year's ago. Sakur married very recently for the second time. Though living in the same room, his younger brother, who works in a bindery, does not share the common kitchen. Their sister is married. Her husband lives in Bangla Desh. She has one child. When the sister comes to Calcutta, she lives with Sakur's family. Her husband also comes on occasional visit to Calcutta.

Sakur had to start work at the early age of eight. It was forced by economic distress on account of his father's protracted illness. Neither Sakur, nor his younger brother could have any education. His own account is as follows.

I started work on my own account. I made slip-pads etc. with paper purchased by me. The pads were sold by myself directly to shops, particularly to those selling fountain pens in Dharmatala, New Market and adjacent areas. I myself carried the things from one shop to another. I was the maker and vendor of the goods. I have never worked in any other owner's unit. All the work was learnt by me in the bindery which was once owned by my father.

I sell all goods for ready cash. No credit purchase is allowed by me. I have at times vended other commodities. Once I sold posset in the Sealdah market for a few months. Also I was in Bombay and worked in a bindery for a month on a daily

wage of Rs.30. But even this apparently high wage was not enough to meet the needs of my separate living in Bombay along with the cost of maintaining the family establishment in Calcutta. Nor could I be reconciled to the idea of living so far away from my family.

I go out to sell my wares at eleven in the morning and return by five in the evening. Two days a week I stay at home to make the goods for sale. The other days are used to go on selling. I have no money to set up a regular bindery. My brother goes from office to office for rebinding old books and registers. He also does at home some rebinding work on order.

The weekly expenses of my family are about Rs.150. It is practically compulsory that I make this provision every week. We have rice in the noon and chapati at night. Meat is rarely eaten in our family. We try to have some cheap fish on most of the days. Coal is used as fuel.

My second wife comes from Birbhum. Her brothers are villagers living on agricultural work. One of their neighbours working in daftaripara arranged this marriage. She is aged about twentysix and an absolute new-comer to city life. She is now passing through some difficulties of initial adjustment.

Previously, I went for seeing films quite frequently. It is now totally stopped. The Bengali films were more liked by me. Bengali is our mother-tongue.

At the time of the Id festival I have to get new clothes for all family members. It costs about Rs.400. I have to give fetra. I give no zakat, nor qurbani.



We have no radio. A neighbour has a T.V. set. I like to see all the things shown on the T.V..

We stayed in Calcutta during the riots of 1964. We had to shift to another house for safety. The Muslims suffered more losses. On the whole, Patwarbagan is a safer place than the more prominent Hindu localities. I am used to bidi, cigarettes and tea. I don't drink alcohol. A lottery ticket is occasionally purchased by me.

Formerly, I was a Congress supporter. But CPM came to our help during the riots. This party sees that communal riots may not take place. I have become a supporter of CPM since 1964.

I go to sleep at eleven in the night and wake up at six in the morning. Except on Fridays, I don't offer regular prayers (namaj).

I have no one to help me. I get no credit even from the grocer.

Sakur Mia works in his own household. Still no family labour is used for his work to earn a livelihood. While Sakur and his family appear to be living at the margin of subsistence, their weekly requirement of Rs.150 indicates a monthly earning of Rs.600, an amount which accrues only to the highest paid workers of the small and medium units in daftaripara. Thus the life story of Sakur Mia contains an element of ambiguity which is amenable to no ready explanation. The point may be further emphasized by the fact of Sakur's inability and unwillingness to work as a hired labourer in Bombay even on quite higher daily wages.

One notable feature of Sakur's work is the combination of own account processing and selling, both contained in an extremely petty mode of operation. It obtains from the very beginning to the present state of Sakur's pattern of livelihood. There was perhaps some influence of his father's small unit on the making of this pattern. The unit of Sakur's father was sold out. Sakur still desires to have a workshop of his own. Even after so many years of hard work, he has no means to set up such a unit.

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Afjal Gazi started work in the binderies at the age of twelve. He is now forty-five and lives in Patwarbagan with his family consisting of his wife, two sons, two daughters, and himself. His own bindery is also in the same locality.

His native place was in a village of Basirhat. Afjal's father died forty years ago. His elder brothers were agricultural labourers. They had no lands of their own. Agricultural work was the traditional source of livelihood for their family. Afjal could have no education due to poverty. He had to come to Calcutta at a very early age in search of work. This was the beginning of Afjal's working life in the binderies of daftaripara. Let us proceed to Afjal's own account for more details.

I came in 1953. It then took about twelve hours to reach Calcutta from my home. Those days there were fewer binderies in this locality. Many rooms were vacant. It was much less crowded.

I had my first assignment in a bindery attached to a printing press. No cash payments were made to me. I worked for food only. My work in this establishment continued for two years. I had been getting a monthly salary of Rs.30 when I left this job. It was followed by my movement from one bindery to another. I worked in about 100 binderies on wages ranging from two to three rupees a day.

The levels of earnings improved after the communal riots of 1964. Many Muslim labourers left for East Pakistan. The local labourers including West Bengal Muslims and the Hindus displaced from East Pakistan gained some advantage. The wages came up between Rs.5 and Rs.6 a day.

I was absolutely illiterate when I first came to Calcutta. Through my own efforts I have learnt to read and write in Bengali. Some local teachers have helped me. I can also read Arabic and know how to read the Koran

I set up my own khata-binding unit in 1970. I had to give a salami of Rs.1200 for the room. It was given out of my own savings which I had built up over six years. I have no papers as evidence of this payment. In the beginning I got work orders from familiar acquaintances.

My unit has three hired workers. One of them is a child worker. I do take part in direct labour. So does my eldest son. My younger son also works on occasions. The weekly payments of three workers amount to Rs.200. The bindery room costs a rent of Rs.100 (including electricity charges). The cutting machine was purchased by me on instalment payments.

I am more a labourer despite being an owner. The hired workers have their fixed tiffin time, leave and holidays. I have none. My younger son has to work at times. He takes lessons from a private tutor in the morning and then goes to school. As and when necessary, he comes to the bindery after his school hours and works till eight or nine at night.

The hired labourers work for scheduled hours. We have to work more to cope with heavy pressure. Our market is extremely competitive. I have to economise on labour expenses and overtime payments in order that no rise in cost occurs to push up the rates. Such higher rates result in the decline of orders from customers. Thus I have to keep the rates low by increasing the burden of work on my sons and myself.

The employees cannot put me in difficulties. They work on a daily wage basis. All of them are temporary workers. No payment is made in case of a worker's absence. I employ others to fill up the gap in labour supply. I do not usually pay any advances to workers.

I married in 1964. A co-worker arranged my marriage with his sister. Their native place is Mallikpur of south 24 Parganas. My father-in-law died years before my marriage. No dowry in cash or ornaments was received by me. A few friends accompanied me on the occasion of my marriage. My wife has no education.

I spend as I earn. We have rice at noon and chapati in the morning and night. Usually, we have meat on Sundays. Both coal and kerosene are used as fuel. The expenditure on the private tutors for the decline of orders from customers. Thus I have to keep the rates low by increasing the burden of work on my sons and myself.

The employees cannot put me in difficulties. They work on a daily wage basis. All of them are temporary workers. No payment is made in case of a worker's absence. I employ others to fill up the gap in labour supply. I do not usually pay any advances to workers.



children is about Rs.150 a month. A rent of Rs.50 (including electricity charges) is paid for the room. My own daily expenses on tea and cigarettes are about Rs.4. There is none to help me with a large loan. I buy all the household needs from one particular grocer's shop where I am allowed some credit purchase in case of need. All marketing for the household is done by my wife.

I offer regular prayers (namaj). New clothes are not necessarily purchased at the time of Id. I have to give fetra. No zakaat is given by me. I am not that rich. A cow is offered for qurbani in Idujjoha, but not every year. I have no means to help my relatives.

I start work at six in the morning. Some time is taken off at noon when I go for my bath and return to work. I have my mid-day meal at two in the afternoon. I have to visit the customers for their orders and payments and also the market for the purchase of necessary materials for the bindery. My work continues till about nine or ten at night. I return home by twelve at night and go to sleep by 1 A.M. after my dinner. I have no radio or T.V. at home. I don't see films. I have neither the time, nor the means for travel. I am yet to see the Metro Railways in Calcutta. There are some obvious advantages of having the work-place and the residence in the same locality. We are quite well-known in the locality because of our long residence. The people are helpful out of a sense of close familiarity. I stayed at home during the 1964 riots and had no trouble. I wish to build my own house. It remains unfulfilled due to lack of means.

I had once been to the playground to see a football match. It was not a happy experience. There were affrays both during and after the match.

I don't bother much about the marriage of my daughters. I shall provide for their education as long as they want to continue. I can leave the rest to the mercy of the almighty (Allah). My eldest son has passed the Secondary Examination. The younger son reads in class VIII, the elder daughter in class VII, and the youngest in class II.

I have no other plans for the future.

The account of Afjal Gazi presents the life and routine of the owner of a small khata-binding unit. He places more emphasis on his role as a labourer in the maintenance of the unit. His sons are also working quite hard in the labour process of the bindery. Afjal makes it clear that their survival in this line of work is crucially dependent on the larger and larger amounts of labour that they can do for their own unit. The encouragement that Afjal gives to his children for education indicates some new directions of development which he may have in mind. As things are, it is not yet clear whether such developments will be attempted within or outside the world of binderies.

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Ali Hosain has his native place in the village Sabalsingpur of Arambag in Hugli. They are four brothers. The eldest works in a bread factory, the second polishes spectacle frames, the youngest works in harmonium making. Ali is the third brother. Their two sisters are married.

The husband of the eldest sister worked under a railway contractor. He is dead. The husband of the second sister lives on cultivation.

Ali is now aged thirtyfive. His father died thirty years ago. He had some property which was sold by their mother to bring up the children. When Ali's father died, one of their sisters was yet to be married and none of the four brothers had attained majority. The eldest brother was twelve. They had no relatives to look after them. At the age of twelve Ali came to Calcutta for work in the binderies. He read upto class V. Ali could not continue his studies because of extreme poverty. He gives the following account of his life and work.

My mejda (the second elder brother) lived in Kidderpore. He introduced me to a bindery in that locality. It was 1965. They gave me nothing more than my daily food. The bindery was mainly engaged in rebinding work. I left this unit and worked for some time in a bindery near Mohammad Ali Park. In this unit also I was paid in food only.

Leaving this unit after six months I joined a khata-binding unit near the Orient Cinema hall. I was paid Rs.60 a month. The amount could only meet my food expenses. I worked in the unit for three years till 1969. My monthly payments were raised to Rs.120. I joined then a khata-binding unit in Mahatma Gandhi Road. My monthly receipts were Rs.50 plus daily food. I worked in the unit for ten years till 1979. Eventually this unit paid me Rs.100 a month and no food.

On my own efforts I rented a room in Patwarbagan in 1979. It was on a monthly rent of Rs.30. There was no demand for selami. This is how my present khata-binding workshop came into existence. In order to begin the business I took a loan of Rs.6000 on interest from money-lenders. With this amount, I could raise only the raw materials consisting of paper goods; no necessary machines could be acquired.

Since our eldest brother was looking after the family, I could have a saving balance of Rs.3000 in the bank. This was built out of my earnings of Rs.100 a month over nearly ten years. It is now three years that I have acquired a cutting machine. It cost me about Rs.6000. I have secured half of the cost from my customers. There are eight such regular customers. They make regular weekly payments.

I have to pay a house rent of Rs.165 (including electricity charges). During the seasonal peak I work along with three hired labourers. I have one hired labourer in the off-season. He is with me throughout the year and has to be paid Rs.150 a week (inclusive of food).

I took up the bindery from a person who left for Bangla Desh in 1979. I could retain all the previous customers. They are good and helpful. I have outstanding loans of about Rs.6000 due to one customer. This is free of interest. The banks insist on having accounts statements etc. to grant loans. For units of my scale, this would call for a lot of additional expenditure. There lies the reason for our resort to customers and money-lenders.

I married in 1979. My mejda arranged the marriage. The house of my father-in-law was adjacent to the place where my mejda married. It was in the 24 Parganas district. My wife read upto class VII. No



dowry in cash was received by me. I was given about four cottahs of lands for building a house. I sold this land for Rs.30000. My father-in-law gave me lands again. On this plot I have constructed a two-room house at the cost of Rs.45000. The amount is made up of the sale proceeds from the lands firstly given by my father-in-law, Rs.1000 from the sale proceeds of my wife's ornaments and my own savings of Rs.5000. This house is a pucca construction.

I have three daughters. The eldest is aged three years, the second one year, and the youngest six months. The eldest daughter has just started going to school. The weekly expenses of my family amount to Rs.150. I have to incur an expenditure of Rs.50 a week for my own needs in daftaripara. I return to the village home every night. I have no addictions, neither tea, nor bidi, cigarettes, nor any attraction for cinema or theatre. I like games and go to see football matches. I have no radio at home. I own a cycle which helps faster transport in the village.

I don't offer daily prayers (namaj). At the time of the Id, new clothes of about Rs.300 are purchased. I share with others the cost of offering gurbani. I am associated with no clubs in Calcutta. I play cards in the company of some friends.

We are four brothers. All of us take care of our mother. I don't live in my own native village. My house is situated in the village of my father-in-law. I send monthly remittances to my mother. There are months when I fail to send this remittance.

I live a happy family life. I cannot look forward to any better future. I have done enough. I have my own unit of work, instead of being someone's servant. One can enjoy this freedom. I don't think of any further improvement in our line of business. There can hardly be any lasting dependence on the hired workers. I have no means to employ them on a permanent basis. They are required only when I have sufficient work orders. This entails a critical problem of coordination. It happens that I don't find workers when they are most needed by me. Here is a recurrent problem of small units like that of mine. The owner-workers have to carry an enormous work load to serve orders on time.

Ali Hosain gives the impression of being well-contented in his present state of things. He considers it an achievement to be the owner of a small unit which yields him moderate earnings. From early boyhood Ali passed through the experience of working in several units at low wages and with little scope of recognition for his work. There was a lot of risk and hard labour in Ali's move to set up his own khata-binding unit. Significantly, in speaking of his own unit, Ali places more emphasis on his freedom as an owner-worker, than on his status as an owner. He highly appreciates the support and patronage received from his regular customers. Thus Ali Hosain is the kind of person who goes on living on their small work units braving all its worries, hazards and burden of work, but who loves the freedom of being self-employed and keeps intact a sense of lasting satisfaction from such a position of work.

\* \* \*

Rahim Uddin is now forty-two (1988). He has worked in binderies since the age of fourteen. His native village is Husenpur in Joynagar of South 24 Parganas. Poverty pushed him to work in Calcutta. He began work in a hotel of Patwarbagan. Within two months he joined a bindery in the neighbourhood. Rahim got no wages in the hotel. He was given only his food.

His father was a mason. He died when Rahim was only fifteen. Three of their six brothers have died. The elder brother died leaving two daughters. One of them died at an early age. Another daughter is married and the widow of the elder brother now lives with her daughter and son-in-law. Rahim's younger brother was a political worker of the CPI(M). He died after an attack of madness. Rahim suspects some political rivals might have poisoned him. His family remains dependent on Rahim. Rahim's old mother lives with him as his dependent.

We have gathered from Rahim Uddin the following account of his life and work.

I started as a bindery worker in the khata-binding unit of Zalil Mia. He was from East Pakistan (now Bangla Desh). During the communal riots of 1964 Zalil Mia left for his homeland. Returning to Calcutta Zalil ran his bindery for some more time. He left finally in 1968. I started work on a monthly earning of Rs.75. After the deduction of my food expenses I used to get Rs.10 in hand. My monthly pay increased to Rs.150 in course of the next five years. Zalil Mia left after five years.

The workshop remained closed for about a year after Zalil Mia's departure. I persuaded the landlord to issue the rent receipt in my name. I had to give him Rs.500. Thus I began work on my own account. Firstly, all work was done by me alone. Later I hired one or two workers. Last year one customer purchased a cutting machine for my bindery. It cost Rs.12000. I will pay him back by allowing a deduction of Rs.2000 each year from my bills for supplying his orders. The orders from this customer reach a peak in the Diwali season. I am illiterate. This badly hinders my business.

I work for three to four customers every year. There are two peak seasons during Diwali and at the time of the Bengali New Year. A customer makes partial payments every week while the particular work is in progress. The bill for the entire work is settled after its completion. I have to agree to a 10 per cent deduction from the final bill in case of some advance payments by a customer. Such an arrangement puts me to serious inconvenience. In order to meet some pressing cash requirements, I have to borrow from money-lenders at high interest. I have no alternative. This is the only work I know.

There are so many ways that customers cheat us. They place orders at a particular rate. When the work is complete, they make complaints about the quality. Such complaints are often baseless. Still I have to seek their mercy. Some arbitrary deductions are then made from my bill. This is how our earnings are reduced. Such are the means by which the rich become richer. I work along with one hired labourer throughout the year. Two more workers are employed during the peak seasons.



My marriage at the age of twenty was arranged by my mother and other elders of the family. My first wife died a year after the marriage. Her father is still alive. Their family lives on agriculture. A large part of their lands has been lost in legal feud. The family has become poor.

I married for the second time three years after the death of my first wife. No dowry in any form was received by me in the two marriages. My second wife is a cousin of my brother-in-law (sister's husband). Her father stayed in my house and looked after the cultivation of my lands. He died a year ago. His sons live on their own cultivation.

I have five sons and a daughter. The expenses of my family amount to Rs.500 a month. There are private tutors for all my sons; Rs.60 for the two elder sons and Rs.20 for the younger ones. My aunt teaches the younger children. She does not charge much. I have to pay Rs.300 a month for my younger brother's family. Thus a payment of Rs.800 is my unavoidable obligation every month. Considering my own family and that of my deceased younger brother, I have to look after eleven dependents.

At times I can have fishes from my own pond. I have about 10 cottahs of arable land. It is no inheritance, but my own acquisition. A small orchard of about half an acre is taking shape under my care. I have planted safeda, jamrul and guave trees. I believe from the next year the orchard will yield an annual income of about Rs.500.

Formerly, I offered daily prayers (namaj). I cannot do it at present. The pressure of work is too much. I live through the week in my bindery at Patwarbagan. I have my meals at a local hotel. An expenditure of Rs.1000 is necessary at the time of Id. I have to give

fetra. No offer of zakat is my practice. I am not that rich. In some years, but not all, I offer a cow for gurbani at Idujjoha. I am not a disciple of any preceptor (pir).

There is a radio in my village home. I have one also in my bindery. My village has no regular supply of electric power. There is therefore no question of having a T.V. set at home. I get no leisure for viewing T.V. in Calcutta. Once in a while I go to see a film. The films on social themes have more attraction. Recently I have seen 'Chota Bou'.

I had once been to Digha. I have never visited the prominent places in Calcutta. My younger brother was a political worker of the CPM. I still vote for this party, even though I have no other links with them. I am not associated with any local club. My work in the bindery leaves no time for such pastime. I go on with the same routine day after day. Some visits to the market are required for the purchases to meet the needs of the bindery.

My own weekly expenses in Patwarbagan are about Rs.50. This is mainly on food. I spend the week-end in my village home. I have no addictions. Some close friends look after me in case of any trouble. They are all associated with bindery work in the locality. I have no close friends in my village.

In the peak seasons, the bindery costs are Rs.1500 a month for labour payments. It comes down to Rs.500 a month in off-season. The workers offer their work against payment. Any work beyond scheduled hours involves overtime payments. The workers are less obedient than before. The CMP rule for many years has made the workers more conscious of their rights. The sudden absence of a worker puts me to considerable difficulties. More work burden has to be borne by me. Indeed,

at times I find the load of ceaseless work to be quite exasperating.

Rahim Uddin's khata-bindery has completed two decades of its working. While an owner for a long period, Rahim still puts much more emphasis on his labouring self, on the enormous burden of work which he has to carry himself to earn what is necessary for meeting the minimum needs of his large family. Although he has no education, Rahim is rather well-organised in his life and work. His ideas of having some agricultural lands under cultivation and of the plan for a small orchard are significant. Rahim seems to be handicapped by too many children of his own and further by the obligation of maintaining his deceased brother's family. Rahim tells little about any future plans. We have enough experience of initiative and hard work in Rahim's life-story. He shows a keen sense of what he gives to his employees and what is received from them. An element of differentiation creeps into his statements. It may not then be baseless to imagine that some more success in business may convert him more into a pure owner.

\* \* \*

We shall not present any more individual life stories of owner-workers. This sub-section will end with an account of a different kind. Let us observe a medium size khata-binding unit in the course of a day's work. Abdul, the owner of this unit, is also a direct labourer.

The bindery is located in a room of about 130 square feet. A platform has been built at a height of 7 feet from the floor. The women workers sit on this platform and do stitching. Entering the room, we find an electronic clock on the opposite wall. An old mat is spread on the floor. It is full of dirt, stained in patches, and has many signs of wear and tear. The male workers sit on this mat. A ladder is fixed just beside the door through which we enter the room. It is used for going up on the raised platform and coming down. A ceiling fan is provided for the comfort of the male workers on the floor. A table fan is placed on the platform for women workers. One cutting machine is installed to the right of the ladder.

Abdul, the owner of this bindery, always works along with his workers, except for the gaps when he goes to the market and talks with the customers. He can read the newspaper and is able to maintain the necessary accounts. Abdul sits at one extreme of the floor just under the clock. He is forty-three. A lunci and a genji make up his working apparel. He wears a wrist-watch. Two workmen, two apprentices (sagred) and a boy of twelve are at work. Two women workers do stitching on a piece-rate basis. The bindery is working with a total strength of eight workers (including the owner-worker).

One workman comes from Tiljala in south-east Calcutta. He goes home at the end of a day's work. Montu, the 'boy' lives with his mother in Belegkata. Murshed, the master workman (ostad kariqar) stays in another bindery with men from his native place of Bagnan in Haora district. Murshed has his meals in the common kitchen of the bindery



where he stays. He has food in a local eating house on days when the common kitchen may not function. Murshed goes home every saturday. The workmen and apprentices are all clad like Abdul in lungi and genji. The 'boy' wears a dirty half-pant and nothing to cover the upper part of his body. We find the bindery engaged in the processing of a large order of 2000 index-files. It is an urgent order.

We reach the bindery at about eleven in the morning. The work is in full swing. They started work at nine. However, the two women workers have just arrived. They are not directly involved in the work for the files. The owner directs them to complete stitching of a lot of exercise-books. Murshed, the head workman, asks the 'boy' to give him a glass of water. The male workers talk very little in the midst of their work. The women workers talk in a very low voice among themselves in course of their stitching work. It is not clearly audible to those working on the floor.

As the time is nearing twelve noon, each worker appears to speed up the work in his hand. An hour's recess for tiffin commences from twelve noon. Murshed leaves for the neighbouring bindery to have his meal. Abdul and the two apprentices will have the food prepared in the common kitchen of this bindery. Four others have brought food from home. They are the two women workers, the workman from Tiljala and the 'boy'.

The male workers eat from their dishes sitting on the same mat. Abdul and his workers sit side by side. Montu does not sit with them. He sits at a distance having food from his tiffin-box. While eating, he stays away from the Muslims. The women workers, who are also Hindus, eat sitting

on the platform where they work. For them however it is just a matter of convenience than any prejudice like that of the 'boy'. Whether cooked in the joint kitchen or brought from home, the food is rice and cooked vegetable. We went to the bindery where Murshed ~~was~~ had his meal. They were having rice and shrimp cooked in oil and spices.

After having their meals, the workers rest for about half an hour. They read through this page or the other of the Ananda Bazar Patrika. Some have pan and bidi or cigarettes. Finding the report of a road accident in the newspaper, the workers talk about some other serious accidents of the recent past.

Their conversation moves to a different story about the hazards of bus transport. One worker narrates as follows. Once on his way back from Siliguri to Calcutta in a bus, another bus was found to be lying overturned on the road. But the driver did not stop the vehicle since the whole thing could be contrived by some miscreants to seize upon the passengers of this bus for robbery.

The conversation moves further to the theme of tigers in the Sundarbans. The elder brother of an apprentice has married a girl of one Sundarban village. This worker speaks of tigers swimming across the rivers to catch their prey. The other apprentice comments that a tiger cannot jump more than twelve feet; one is safe by keeping further away. The 'boy' is full of surprise to know such things about tigers.

Murshed lies on the mat covering his eyes with one hand. Abdul talks with the apprentices about a film which he has seen recently. Some comments are made by them on the performance of a well-known actress. The women workers are keen to start work as soon as possible. Their payments are on piece work. Abdul gives them instructions for further work. A little later Murshed gets up and asks, 'Is it time to begin work ?' Abdul says, 'We are late by a few minutes'. They all sit again in their respective places of work. Murshed asks the 'boy' to fill up the polythene jug with water.

We find each worker in his place. Murshed is fixing the signs of the alphabet (i.e. A, B, ....., Z) on index-tags to be suitably inserted in the files before being bound up.

A worker from a neighbouring bindery comes in. He does not go back to his work on time. Abdul asks him 'You work in Bisu's bindery, Don't you ?'

'Yes'.

'Did someone come from Orissa ?'

'Who is he ?'

'He said there was heavy pressure of work in Orissa and they were frantic about getting more supplies of labour'.

Indeed, Abdul was telling a lie to tease this worker. Murshed could see Abdul's design and said 'I met him beneath that neem tree'.

The worker asks, 'Is it true, "Company"?' ("Company" is a usual form to address Abdul, an owner). Murshed asked the worker, 'Are you ready to go out of Calcutta ? The man from Orissa was making enquiries'.

Perhaps, the worker realized that Abdul and Murshed were just teasing him. He left for his own work-place.

Murshed said after the man left, 'Yesterday this fellow returned after midnight. I took the trouble of opening the gate for him. An awful bother after a day's hard work ! It would be better to keep him waiting outside for the whole night'.

Murshed finds that Montu has no work. He tells the 'boy' to get board pieces of suitable size. Abdul writes a specification slip and gives it to the 'boy'. Montu will pass it on to the board-cutter. He leaves and takes the jug with him to bring more water as directed by Abdul.

An apprentice glues the back of a triangular rexin piece which is then pasted by one workman on the top corners of a board. Murshed goes on with his index-fixing. They are all fully absorbed in their work. There is complete silence. The workers cease to have any reaction to our presence. The two women workers are talking on their own personal affairs. One of them tells Murshed 'Uncle (chacha), will you give me "S"? These are the first letters of my name.' All their conversation is not audible. Both of them come from Barasat.



Montu returns with water and informs that no board is immediately available. Abdul had gone out to ease himself. On his return the 'boy' tells him that the board pieces cut to proper sizes will be supplied on Tuesday.

Abdul is also assured by the boy that he has given the size specifications to the board-cutter.

An apprentice reports a complaint from the people in the adjacent unit that scraps of food leavings have been thrown before their shop. The 'boy' is held guilty.

Montu is found to watch how rexin is pasted. He denies having thrown the leavings of food and water before the adjoining shop. Abdul points out that he is late in the morning on most of the days. Montu is accused of telling lies. Murshed tells Montu not to come tomorrow which is a Friday - 'you are a liar. You may be offered for qurbani on Friday'. Montu does not go near Abdul. He is afraid of a thrashing. Abdul threatens that Montu's dues for two days will be deducted from his payments. Montu goes then to clean up what may have been thrown before the neighbouring unit. He grumbles for being forced to work as a sweeper.

All the time Abdul was engaged in index setting along with Murshed. He has to leave soon for the market. It is nearing three in the afternoon. Here comes the customer who has placed order for the files. Abdul informs him of the additional cost and overtime payments which are required to make the things ready on time. The customer tries to bargain for some reductions in the rates to be charged for his order. Abdul does not relent. He informs the customer that the files would be fully delivered on next Wednesday. The customer

tells Abdul to arrange a van for carrying the files to his Camac Street Office.

Abdul tells Murshed to do overtime work till 9 P.M. The workmen, apprentices and the boy shall work. The women workers will leave at five. Before leaving for the market Abdul enquires if they will require more materials for stitching within this time. Both of them answer in the negative.

Montu had gone to bring a large bundle of papers from a ruling unit. He returns just before five carrying a heavy bundle on his head. He keeps the papers in one corner. Montu is told of the overtime schedule. He declines to work overtime. One apprentice asks Montu to bring some materials which will be needed for overtime work. Montu refuses. There ensues a sharp altercation. The apprentice beats Montu. Montu cries aloud saying he knew not about the 'night' schedule (i.e. overtime work).

The women workers had come down from the platform. They changed their saris in a nook behind the cutting machine. It is rather concealed from the view. They come out ready to return home. The women hold that Montu should not have been beaten. Murshed supports the action remarking that Montu is too insolent and wayward to listen to any persuasion.

The women move to leave the bindery. Murshed comments that it is just four-thirty. One woman raises her hand with the wrist-watch before Murshed's eyes. Murshed holds her wrist and remarks 'Oh, your watch has stopped !' The woman replies, 'Something wrong with your eyes, old man !' The women rush out to catch the train.

Montu puts on a trouser and shirt. He does not stay for overtime work.

Others get ready for 'night' work. The apprentice, who beat up Montu, has to fetch the necessary materials and bring tiffin for all. Very soon they speed up the pace of their overtime work.

Let us conclude this set of life stories with a few words on the relevance of our description of one working day in a medium-size khata-binding unit. Abdul is an owner who is also a direct labourer. His adaptation to business calculations is quite intelligent. It is well expressed in his negotiations with the customer. Abdul's treatment of his labourers combines the familiarity of a co-worker with the disciplinarian attitude of a watchful employer. This is most evident in the mix of personal idiom and command applied to the child worker. The mode of control over all workers blends personal proximity, and even the owner's large degree of labour participation, with the well laid out routine of each worker in the labour process.

Murshed's role as the head workman has a large element of command and supervision. He assumes full charge of the workshop in Abdul's absence. Abdul keeps close rapport with Murshed in matters relating to the work and management of the unit. Their ready understanding of each other is expressed even in the course of a joke with the worker from another bindery. The issue on which they can

tease that person points to a more common problem of numerous bindery workers. Any talk of regular employment elsewhere raises in the listener a mixed feeling of curiosity and disbelief.

The plight of the child worker is obvious. Montu is ordered by all to do various odd jobs. Indeed an apprentice seems to be quite hostile to the 'boy'. He is the first man to charge Montu with the throwing of food leavings in front of the adjoining shop. Again, the same apprentice beats up Montu for not agreeing to do overtime work. We find that the apprentice has to bring papers for overtime work and tiffin for all when the 'boy' leaves without staying for 'the night'. It appears he is senior only to the 'boy'. When the 'boy' is absent, all his odd jobs are to be done by this junior apprentice.

The apprentice may then be always on the look-out to avoid such troubles. It may contribute to his bitterness of temper about Montu. But for the women workers, none else in the bindery shows any sympathy for Montu. At times he may be unwilling to carry out orders from all. In view of his work-load, it is not unlikely for a boy of his age. Moreover, amidst all this, Montu has to take some care on his own for learning the different jobs of the binding process. This is clear from the attention which he desperately devotes to watching the work that goes around him.

Though working on piece-rates, the women workers appear to have fairly continuous work in this bindery. It imparts an element of stability to their employment. They are quite familiar with other workers of the bindery. In an exchange of words bearing on levity, one woman is heard to



address the head workman as an old man. Obviously, she mocks Murshed for his untimely grey hairs, since he is not yet forty.

We have a glimpse of the ways the workers spend their leisure during the tiffin recess. After their meal the workers still have half an hour left for recess. Murshed prefers a nap. The women on piece rate work begin stitching without further delay. They go on with their own conversation while working.

Abdul and the two apprentices look through the Ananda Bazar Patrika. In their talks the two apprentices pass from the report of a road accident to robbery in long distance buses and to the danger of tigers in the Sundarban area. A workman and the 'boy' remain silent listeners. The apprentices then have a look at the page of cinema advertisements and talk on recent films. Abdul joins them with his comments on a well-known actress as he thinks she is 'miscast' in an 'adult' film.

We can infer very little from this brief scenario of leisure. One point may however be mentioned. Time and again in course of our experience of such tiffin time conversations among workers in several binderies, we have heard them talk about the incidents of uncertainty and insecurity of living. In this particular case, we have road accidents, robbery and tigers. Some other issues, which frequently feature in such conversations, are the hazards of missing a train, late running of local trains, the hazards of being caught for travelling in trains without tickets, sudden stoppage of transport, break out of a terrible fire in some poor dwellings and the damage caused by a pick pocket.

Again such stories often end in some humour perhaps to eliminate any sense of fear which haunts them. Take for example the remarks in the story above on how one remains safe by staying just beyond the twelve feet range of a tiger's leap. We heard one instance of a talk on the pick pocket ending in general laughter as an apprentice told a child worker, 'Buy me a pick pocket when you go to bring our tea'. Another case of talks about a terrible fire was closed with a suggestion from one worker that a bucket of water in the kitchen could always prevent a destructive fire. Such humour or even belief often turns the conversation to more entertaining subjects like the films recently seen by the workers. Thus the verbalization of insecurity and its escape routes is marked by a deliberate urge for relief. Indeed, all this may be an idiom of leisure to ease somewhat the drudgery, pain and insecurity of their daily living.

The points may become more clear in the next subsection where we present the life-stories of workers who are not owners. We have already presented some of the life-stories collected from owner-workers. The principle of our selection is to particularize the subjects, and not to repeat similar cases with any object of standardization. Since we are observing labouring people who may not fit with our ready stock of social science categories, it is necessary to know the subjects in their diversities of social existence.

And so the life stories relate to subjects like a moderately successful Harendra Nath who is the labouring owner of a ruling workshop; Bipin Das who owns a small book-binding unit and can be hardly distinguished from a wage

worker; Abdur Rahaman, the colourful old man of seventy five who narrates his long experience full of many events of the past and the present; Aziz Molla who is reconciled to his humble position as an owner worker; a marginal being like self-employed Abhoy Saha; Sakur Mia who works alone in his household and sells his wares going from shop to shop; Dilip Saha who owns a small ruling workshop and is very much worried over the threat to his work and earnings from the incursion of offset printing; a khata-binder like Afjal Gazi who does not complain of any acute poverty; Ali Hosain with a sense of pride in his unit which gets him enough for just tolerable living and Rahim Uddin working in his own bindery for moderate earnings along with the immediate plan for an orchard to yield him some supplementary income.

(ii). Wage workers.

Let us then proceed to some selected life-stories of wage workers. We shall present the accounts narrated by twenty-five workers. Of them fifteen are Hindus, ten men and five women. The ten Muslim workers consist of eight men and two women. One of them had been born a Hindu who was converted at the age of thirteen ~~thr~~ough marriage with a Muslim who abandoned her after some years. The child workers could not provide the accounts of their own lives.

The accounts relate to wage workers in book-binding, khata-binding and ruling activities. They include all categories like workman (kariqar), semi-workman (nim kariqar) and apprentices (sacred). The women are mostly stitching workers. One woman worker was engaged in scrap-picking as a source of livelihood. Another woman was a workperson in a book-binding unit. In ~~the~~ book-binding the wages stated by

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the workers in their accounts may often be less than what we have noted before in the section on earnings and living (Sen, OP 127, pp.33-43). Most of these accounts were collected before the wage increases which had taken effect after the strike and its settlement in book-binding in April 1990.

\* \* \*

Umanath De is the workman of a medium size khata-binding unit. This bindery is owned by three brothers. They are Hindus. All of them are also direct labourers in the bindery. There are three hired workers of whom Umanath is the workman. One hired worker is a saqred (an apprentice) and another a child of about ten years, who works as 'the boy'. In busy seasons two additional labourers are hired for about three months in a year.

Umanath is nearing fifty. Their native place was in the Maheshpara village of Vikrampur, Dacca. Umanath's father stayed in Calcutta. He was a clerk in the Alipore court and lived in a rented house in Bhabanipur. Umanath's father used to go to his native home during the Good Friday and Puja holidays. Their family had to leave for Calcutta in 1950. The other relatives like Umanath's uncles left earlier. Umanath recalls that in those early years after the partition, the situation became more and more insecure for the Hindu population. Their homestead covering about half a bigha of land and a bigha (one-third of an acre) of arable lands were left behind.

Umanath was about ten years old when he came to Calcutta in 1950. Staying in the rented accommodation of his father, Umanath received admission to the South Suburban School. He read upto Class VII. His father moved with the whole family to a house in Banshdroni. This house was built by Umanath's father on a plot purchased by him. It had tin roof and walls made of mud-plastered bamboo laths. Umanath gave up school studies. His school was quite distant from Banshdroni which then had very little facilities of public transport. Moreover, Umanath had no liking for school education. He wished to be an earner by learning something through direct practice and training.

From the age of fifteen Umanath moved from one activity to another. He could not continue to work in a shop for electrical service and repairs. These people made no payments. After a month's work, an amount of Rs.5 was paid to Umanath. In quick succession he worked for short periods lasting between a few days to a few months in a gramophone shop, a pipe casting unit and a sweets' shop. He had to quit their home because of some discord in the locality. Umanath took shelter in a house whose residents arranged for him the job in a tea shop. This work required dish-washing and Umanath felt it would be dishonourable to do such a job.

Umanath joined a bindery in 1955. It was then the usual practice not to pay a new worker for the first six months. A beginner had to provide for his own living during these months of learning. However, Umanath got Rs.34 a month and two annas each day for his transport. In case of overtime work an additional four annas were given for his tiffin. Umanath left this unit after six months.

Through the next thirty years he worked in about ten different units, sometimes for less than one year in a unit and at times for four to five years. The units were spread over areas from Sahanagar to Patwarbagan. He worked in a ruling-cum-printing press in Chinabazar for five years. He left along with his brothers and a Muslim co-worker because of a sharp conflict with the owner over their attempts to build up a labour union. This was followed by about three years of job insecurity when Umanath moved from one unit to another in Patwarbagan. Let us follow his own account from the point when he got appointment in a large press at Bowbazar. It was 1972.

I had a basic pay of Rs.65 and my total salary was Rs.115 inclusive of all allowances. There were facilities of provident fund and employees' state insurance. I worked here for two years. My father died after long illness. We were four brothers and two sisters. I was the eldest. My salary was insufficient for bearing the expenses of the whole family.

I came back to join a ruling unit in Patwarbagan. I could have monthly earnings of Rs.300 including overtime payments. I worked in this unit for two years. A tea shop in Banshroni was rented by me so that my younger brother could have fair earnings. He could not manage it properly. I left work in Patwarbagan to take charge of the teashop. I could run it pretty well and the earnings were reasonable to meet our family requirements. Such was the shape of things when I married in 1977. There was a dispute among brothers over their respective claims on the shop. I left handing over the shop to my second brother.



I returned to daftaripara in search of work. I worked in a large ruling unit for about six years. There was a strike in 1985. I lost my job. Since I was in union leadership, no other bindery would employ me as a regular worker. I had to move around as a casual worker. For some time I worked in a bindery which was being run by some co-workers on contract. Eventually, in 1986 I joined the bindery where I am now working. My monthly earnings are about Rs.500 on a daily rate of Rs.21. No payment is made for sundays when I don't work. I have four paid holidays in the year - May Day, Viswakarma Puja, the days of Ashtami and Navami during the Durga Puja festival. I shall talk with the owner for paid leave on sundays and eighteen more paid holidays each year.

The owners of this bindery are also direct labourers. They work along with me and respect my skill and experience. When we are at work, it may appear to you that they are my sagred. However, the owners take rest when they wish, I can't. Again, while in the midst of work, I can not readily respond to anyone calling me from outside. The owners can.

The economic condition of the owners is not much better than mine. They have to be informed in advance in case I seek an advance of Rs.100. This was my experience when my son had to go through an operation for the removal of stones from his kidney. I had help from the owners and some friends. The amounts are treated as donations to a common pool for helping someone in an emergency. We go for similar arrangements in case of any urgent need faced by one of our close friends.

There are six members in my family, my wife, a son, three daughters and myself. The house is my own. We have no electric connection in our house. I earn about Rs.125/- a week at the bindery. My own weekly expenses for transport and pocket money are Rs.30. My son is ten years old. All the children are engaged in studies. It is just not possible to meet all the household expenses from my earnings at the bindery. I have to give my wife Rs.120 in the least to meet all household expenditure through a week. I try to earn an additional Rs.40 each week. It is from rebinding of old books which I do at home. I have no time for leisure. My work in the binery begins at nine in the morning.

My father-in-law came from East Bengal after the partition and settled in Bara Nilpur in Bardhaman. He died before my marriage. My wife was born in Bara Nilpur. No dowry was received by me. My wife read upto Class VII. She has her mother and a younger brother who works in a grocer's shop.

Previously, I was a cinema-addict. My visits to cinema are extremely rare these days. On sundays I do sometimes go to a neighbour's place for watching the T.V.. We have a transistor radio at home. I can listen to its programmes only on sundays. I have lost the attraction which I once had for reading stories and fictions. I now like more to read biographies, particularly those of Ramkrishna and Vivekananda. My wife worships the goddess Lakshmi at home. I have secured religious initiation at Ram Thakur's ashram (hermitage) in Jadavpur.

I have no attraction for work in the bindery business. It will never yield me an income large enough for the proper maintenance of my family. My main concern is to provide for the children's education. I think of returning back to the shop which I had set up in our locality. I am ready to start again even though half of the shop is now being run by my brother. I submitted an application for a bank loan of Rs.5000 with a view to resuming my own business on a larger scale. Although my application had been submitted on the first day, I was not among the selected one thousand persons who got loans. I have also got a license for the work of a bus conductor. But I find no bus which is ready to fix me in its service.

I don't dabble in politics. I confine myself to what is essential for the conduct of trade unions. No doubt more success would come my way if I had run round carrying party banners on my shoulder.

Umanath De comes from a family which faced the hazards of displacement from East Bengal after the country's partition. He had little formal education. After more than thirty years experience of work in many binderies and ruling workshops, Umanath is still desperately looking for better earning opportunities. He recalls his involvement in the union movement of ruling workers. His present employers are labourers themselves and have no means to offer any better terms to Umanath. We cannot miss the caustic tone of Umanath's concluding observations about politics.

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Ajit Ghosh works in a small ruling unit. He is a senior workman. The owner is also a direct labourer. The unit has five regular workers including the owner. Ajit is one of the two adult male workers. The other adult male worker is the owner himself. There are one female and two child workers.

Ajit's father came with his family from East Bengal before independence and settled at Badarpur in the Cachar district of Assam. He depended on the hereditary occupation of a milkman. Ajit has faint memories of his childhood. He can just recall that his father sold sweets which he prepared at home. Ajit appeared in the Test for the School Final examination. He could proceed no further with his studies due to acute economic difficulties. We have obtained from him the following account of his experience in daftaripara.

I started work at the age of sixteen in 1972. Our family shifted from Assam to Habra. My uncle's father-in-law lived in Habra. We followed our uncle as he decided to move to Habra. I was then about eight years old. We were four brothers and one sister. This sister was married in 1980. Her husband was a lorry driver working in Assam. My mother died a few years after I joined work in daftaripara.

When it became impossible to have the means for continuing my studies, my father requested a gentleman in Habra to find a job for me. One relative of this gentleman had a ruling unit in Anthony Bagan. I was introduced to this owner who agreed to employ me. I was given food and shelter, but no cash payments in the beginning. I was very keen to learn some work through direct practice and training. Prior to my



joining the ruling unit, I worked for some days at a kite-making shop in Habra.

After a year and a half I requested my employer to give me cash payments instead of food and lodging. The economic distress of our family became more acute. I decided to be a daily commuter from Habra and to have my food at home. I was paid a monthly salary of Rs.70. I worked in the unit for five years. My monthly payment was raised by then to Rs.120. I moved to a ruling unit in Budhu Ostagar Lane on a monthly payment of Rs.150. I left this unit after two years as the owner became irregular about payments.

My next place of work was in a ruling unit which I decided to run on a contract basis. I paid Rs.125 per month to the owner for the room and the machine. I could have a monthly earning of Rs.400 after meeting all expenses. The owner had his binding business in the front part of the same room. He had some underhand deal in the government quota of 'Bangalipi' exercise books. Some ruling work was done by me for his production of exercise books.

The child workers are subject to extreme maltreatment in binderies. One day the owner from whom I held the contract for a part of the room and the ruling machine, sent to me a child worker to take delivery of some processed materials. The work was nearly complete. I asked the child worker to wait for a little while and told him to sit on a tool. Very soon the owner also came to enquire about the things for which he had sent the child worker. He was terribly angry to see the boy sitting on a tool. He abused me in the most filthy language and made nasty comments on my mother. I caught him by his collar and struck a sharp blow on his face.

Next morning I found on coming to the bindery that its doors were closed. The workers of my ruling unit were waiting outside. The keys were kept by Sudhir Das, the owner who had that row with me on the previous day. He wanted to terminate my contract and directed his men to remove the ruling machine elsewhere. I protested arguing that he must not abruptly close the contract and should let me work with the machine for the scheduled period. I made an attempt to remove the ruling machine to another room where I could go on working with my men. We were obstructed by Sudhir's stooges.

The dispute continued. There were threats and counter-threats of getting police help. I had one difficulty. Within the room Sudhir's Clarendon stocks of 'Bangalipi' exercise books were mixed up with the produce of my ruling unit. He could put me in great trouble by shifting to me the responsibility for those 'Bangalipi' stocks. I had no documentary evidence to prove the contrary. Such considerations prompted me to abandon the arrangement. I was paid a compensation of Rs.600. I demanded Rs.2000. Indeed, the amount of my bills receivable would be Rs.1500. I would never be able to realise those bills in case of the closure of my ruling unit.

After this incident I did no work for one month and a half. I worked then for two years at a unit in Anthony Bagan. My monthly earnings increased from Rs.280 to Rs.300. This was followed by a year's work in the unit where I am currently employed. During the year my salary increased from Rs.320 to Rs.340 in the beginning. My next move was to go again for contract work. The owner had to be paid Rs.200 a month. My own monthly earnings were about Rs.500. The room where I worked under this contract was shared by two brothers, one is in ruling business and the other in binding. They had

a dispute. The brother in the business of bindery bought the other share and occupied the whole room. I had to quit.

By that time I was deeply involved in union work. No owner was willing to offer me employment. I made an effort to set up my unit. A room was rented at Rs.250 per month plus Rs.50 for electricity charges. A selami of Rs.1000 had to be paid. I had this amount as loan from my landlord in Jadavpur. A further amount of Rs.3000 had to be borrowed for the purchase of a ruling machine. The loan was given to me by a person who was well acquainted with one of my friends. This friend owned a bindery. The loan was given to me from the retirement funds of the lender who stipulated a monthly interest of Rs.50 per every thousand rupees.

Thus I incurred a total loan of Rs.4000 to start my own unit. It had a good beginning. I did not know that the room where I installed my unit had the disrepute of being an inauspicious place. Such a prejudice hindered the flow of orders from customers. I stuck to it for two years. After the closure of my unit I paid no interest on the outstanding balance of the loan of Rs.3000. About Rs.1300 of the principal amount still remains unpaid. I now make a repayment of Rs.100 a month from my earnings.

I was by then a union leader. Before the last Pujas I took a closed ruling unit and ran it for six months. A ream of paper was stolen from the store of the man who owned the unit which I had taken on contract. It caused the stoppage of orders from the particular customer. I had to give up the contract. I joined this present work after the Pujas last year. I have a monthly earning of Rs.520. I am paid more than others in this line. I work with more responsibility. The senior workmen of this locality usually get Rs.450 a month.

There was a union of ruling workers when I joined work. It collapsed subsequently. I have built up the present union of ruling workers. The first initiative was taken in 1977. Most workers in the ruling units are of the school going age. The union has succeeded in securing for them better treatment from the owners. This can be said to be the main gain. Our union has no settled office room. A strike lasted for six months in 1985. Indeed, the owners declared a lock out. Our movement was proceeding by stages. The owners made no response to our petition of demands. We stopped overtime work and then slowed down the pace of daily work. Such a situation continued for two months. The owners suddenly stopped all business.

All units were closed. It was very difficult for the poorest workers to go on with the strike. I did some work on contract to help them. We kept a sharp watch that no owner could enter their units and take away the things.

The officer-in-charge of the Amherst Street police station arranged a tripartite meeting. We were asked to allow the owners to enter their units. We agreed on the condition that nothing could be removed from a unit in course of the dispute. A local club of young men helped to arrange another meeting where a settlement was effected. Some of the economic demands were accepted. A tiffin allowance was conceded. We were also assured that there would be no retrenchment. However, some union leaders were not taken back for work in their units. Some of them had to find employment in the ruling units of Chinabazar.

Eight years ago I married the daughter of a small trader in ghee and butter. I was introduced to her by a younger brother of the owner of the ruling unit which was my first work-place in daftaripara. The



girl's father was a close friend of my employer's younger brother. She passed the Secondary Examination. We were in love before marriage. Our caste was the same. Thus this 'love marriage' was not at the cost of my caste. I am proud of my marriage.

Our family has three members, my wife, a son and myself. Our first child was a daughter who died at the age of two. Within five years after my joining work in daftaripara, my parents returned to Assam. In building the house in Habra, my uncle took a loan from her sister-in-law (wife's sister). She had a son who was a ruffian and gave my uncle immense trouble for loan repayment. My father and uncle had to leave under such pressure. The house was sold by my uncle. The money he got from this sale was stolen from his room.

I earn Rs.520 a month. Every month I have to allot Rs.100 for the repayment of that old debt. The monthly house rent is Rs.120. My own tiffin and transport expenses amount to Rs.100 a month. Thus I am left with barely Rs.200 to meet all other expenses. This means serious hardship. I cannot send any money to my old father. My younger brother looks after him. This brother read up to Class VI. He works in the Assam State Electricity Board. I can buy no cloth for my wife, nor enough milk for my son. I have one shirt and a trouser. There are days when I have to go in a lungi to my work-place. It is impossible for me to go for any amusement like cinema or theatre.

I have bitter experience of undertaking ruling units on contract. I don't want to try it again. But the present condition is unbearable. I am ready to go for any government job, even that of a peon or a sweeper.

There is none to help me. I have no backing, nor financial resources. It is not possible to think of starting any business without some initial finance. I am still bearing the burden of the one unsuccessful effort made by me. I have none to come to my help in case of my illness for some days. It is now a year that I have become an activist in CPI (M) politics. I am also known in my locality for my political affiliation.

I stay at home on holidays. There are no friends. My only friends are the ruling workers of daftaripara. I seek no help from my employer. I purchased a transistor radio long ago. It was a second hand purchase. The transistor often goes out of order. I can't use it also due to my inability to purchase new battery.

The son of a poor milkman and confectioner from East Bengal, Ajit Ghosh was forced by poverty to give up his studies after he had been enrolled for appearance in the Secondary Examination. An acquaintance of his father arranged for Ajit's first work in daftaripara. His life story is full of accounts relating to the strike battles of ruling workers. Ajit had a leading role in organising workers' unions and their struggles. The experience of his several failures to set up a unit of his own is significant. It reveals the strange set of problems which may stand in the way of a worker striving to have his own unit.

Ajit's satisfaction with his own marriage may tell us of some elements of his social attitude, 'We were in love before marriage. Our caste was the same. Thus this "love marriage" was not at the cost my caste. I am proud of my marriage'. Ajit finds his present monthly pay

of Rs.520 to be much below his real needs and feels the position to be quite unbearable. He is ready to go for 'any government job, even that of a peon or a sweeper'.

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Haran Sarkar is the workman of a small bookbinding unit. From very early boyhood he stayed at a bindery in Baithakkhana Road for about twenty years. He works still in the same bindery, though the unit's ownership changed in 1964. Haran can remember only in fragments how his father had to leave East Pakistan with his whole family in 1950. Their native village was in Noakhali. His father had a grocer's shop which was looted. Haran gives the following account.

I have no clear memory of my early boyhood when I first came to Calcutta in 1950. I was then only eight years old. The days at Sealdah station can be recalled in sharp contrast to the care and comfort of family life in our village home in East Bengal. I remember my sister refusing to have any food offered to her. It was mainly a gruel of boiled rice and pulses supplied to us by those who were known as 'relief babus'. My mother was always in tears. I also remember my father talking with many people about me. He asked them if I would be given food and shelter by someone.

I understood nothing of what my father wanted to do with me. One day I was brought by my father and another person to Abid Mia who had a bookbinding unit in Patwarbagan. This is how I began work in the bindery. I was given food and shelter.

Abid Mia also provided me with clothes like two half-pants, a qenji and after some time a shirt with half sleeves.

I had no regular contact with my parents and my sister. My father seldom came to see me once a week at Abid Mia's bindery. He told me he would do so while leaving me with Abid Mia. I saw my father once in a fortnight and at times even a month after one visit. He always advised me to work to the satisfaction of Abid Mia who used to give some small amounts (something between two and five rupees) of money to my father.

One day at about three in the afternoon my father came to me at the bindery and broke down in tears. My mother died that morning. Abid Mia gave my father fifty rupees and allowed me to go with him for fifteen days. I returned to the bindery after a fortnight. This was my first view of the shack in which my parents and sister lived in the squatters' colony. I cannot describe the details. I thought I was living in a much better condition at Abid Mia's bindery. My sister died of tuberculosis very soon after my mother's death. I knew this from my father at least a year after her death.

I have no clear ideas of how and what my father earned those days. He died when I was twelve. I was told by my father's neighbours in the colony that he worked as an ordinary helper in construction work, as a shop-assistant in a grocer's shop where he was sacked on the charge of theft and also as a domestic servant for a short while. I remember him looking much older than his age. He died at the age of forty.

Thus I lost all family ties when I was twelve. I continued my stay and work at Abid Mia's bindery. From the very beginning my daily routine of work lasted from seven in the morning till eleven at night. All odd jobs like work in the bindery's kitchen,



fetching tea, water and tiffin for all workers, bringing printed formes from printing presses nearby were assigned to me. I was also keen to learn the jobs of binding. Abid Mia, a worker of experience, helped me to learn. As I had no close relations to look after me Abid treated me with some sympathy. Occasionally, he gave me a rupee or two in addition to my food and shelter. As I became fifteen years old Abid Mia started giving me Rs.20 per month. I could then do the binding jobs as and when required due to the non-availability of some regular workers.

This book-binding unit had two regular workers who were hired on a daily wage basis. Abid himself was a direct labourer. In the busy season of larger orders for the binding of school text books, Abid often hired one more labourer for two to three months. For many years I was reckoned as 'the boy' of the bindery. From about the age of fifteen however I was gradually considered to be a full worker capable of doing binding jobs. In 1958, Abid Mia told me before the busy season that he would hire no **additional** worker since I could then work as his 'sagred' (an apprentice). Abid Mia fixed a weekly payment of Rs.16 for me. From then on I was no longer given free food. My lodging in the bindery was not disturbed. As for food I shared the common kitchen on most of the days. When Abid Mia went to his native village in Khulna, I used to have food in a local eating house. Those days it cost me between Rs.0.75 and Rs.1.25 for each meal depending on the food I had.

Abid Mia's family lived in their native village. Every year he went home once a year and stayed there for about a month. The family had some income-yielding agricultural lands. Abid also sent money from Calcutta through people who

came on periodical visits to Calcutta. As per arrangement Abid paid for some of their expenditures in Calcutta on the understanding that an equivalent amount would be paid by the beneficiary to Abid's wife in their native village. Such exchanges amounted to about Rs.600 to Rs.800 during a year.

While going home, Abid Mia took with him clothes for his wife and children and also other miscellaneous goods of household use. Haran had no idea of the amount of money which Abid Mia carried home in his own custody. Abid left elaborate instructions for his regular labourers as regards the work of the bindery during his absence. Indeed, since the time Abid had admitted Haran as his 'sagred', he did practically put Haran in charge of the bindery during Abid's absence.

By 1963 Haran's earnings increased to Rs.25 a week. During the communal riots of 1964, Abid Mia decided to leave permanently for his native place. He was then aged about fifty-five years. His bindery was taken over by a Hindu workman (kariqar) who had continuous experience of bindery work since 1948 when he came as a displaced person from East Bengal. This workman, Haripada Das, was reputed for his skill as a book-binder. He was on good terms with Abid Mia. Abid persuaded the Muslim landlord of Patwarbagan to transfer the tenancy of the room to Haripada. Haripada paid Abid a total amount of Rs.1000. The landlord received Rs.300 for agreeing to the transfer and the rest of the money was taken by Abid Mia. The cutting machine was given to Haripada. Haripada proposed that Haran would remain in the bindery as his assistant. Haran agreed. Before his departure for home Abid recommended Haripada to all his usual

customers. Haran continued to work in the same bindery with a new owner. He is now a workman (karigar) in the same unit. His present age is forty-six (1988). Through all the vicissitudes of his life Haran is still in the same bookbinding unit where he began work as practically an orphan in 1948. He is now a workman. We can have the details of his more recent experience from Haran's own account.

Haripada-da is about four years my older. After Abid Mia's departure both of us had to work very hard to keep the bindery in good shape. Haripada da increased my weekly payment to R.30. We had only one more worker who had little experience. He worked mainly as a 'boy'. The burden of work on Haripada da and myself was enormous. We worked almost regularly from nine in the morning till ten at night. We had only half an hour's tiffin recess. I still lived in the bindery with the 'boy' worker. Haripada da had a one room rented accommodation in Jadavpur. On most of the days he returned home not before eleven at night. His wife waited for him. They have no children. He was in the bindery by nine in the morning.

Immediately after Haripada da had taken over the bindery, some people started spreading the story among customers that our work would be of a low quality since the unit had no means to hire adequate number of workers. We had to cope with such attacks from competitors through sheer hard labour. In case of need we hired one woman worker to do stitching on piece rates.

Haripada da took about five years to stabilize his unit on a sound **footing**. Our unit grew in reputation. The unit could attract new customers. It came to be well-known for punctual order supplies and moderate

rates. I did all that I could to render my fullest assistance to Haripada da.

In 1970, Haripada da gave me recognition as a workman (karigar). My weekly earnings increased to Rs.100. Our unit now has two regular hired workers. A woman worker does stitching on piece payments. In course of the last eighteen years (talking in 1988) Haripada da has bought a new cutting machine and other subsidiary tools to help binding.

Haripada da is now about fifty. He still works in the labour process from 9 A.M. to 6 P.M. There are days when he goes out in the afternoon for purchases in the market, negotiations with customers and also to expedite the payment of outstanding bills. If necessary, Haripada da is still ready to work overtime till nine in the night. Indeed, he stays almost regularly for an hour or two after 5 P.M. to keep the accounts and other miscellaneous papers up to date. This is one side of the unit's work where I am of little use. I can just read and write in Bengali. It requires some more education to do the accounts, billing and paper work. Haripada da's position is better. He read upto Class VIII in the village school. As and when necessary, Haripada da takes help from a young man who has secured the B.Com Degree. Occasionally, this young man receives some consolidated payment from Haripada da for his service.

My present earnings amoun to about Rs.600 (inclusive of overtime payments) a month. I married a girl of Hugli in 1968. The marriage was arranged by Haripada da. My wife is the sister of a workman in another bindery of daftaripara. No dowry was received by me. I was given a gold ring and a wrist watch. My wife had a few ornaments. They are not of real gold. I had a gold ring made for her. Haripada da gave her a costly sari. My wife



read upto Class III in the village school.

After my marriage I rented a two-room house in Tapsia for our living. The house has tile roof, mud walls and floors with thin layers of cement. Its rent is Rs.100 a month. A daughter was born to us in 1978. I have put her in a school. She is in Class IV. The daughter was born ten years after our marriage. My wife suffered from the miscarriage of three pregnancies during the first ten years after our marriage. When our daughter was born, the doctors advised that my wife must not conceive again. They spoke of difficulties and dangers which were not quite intelligible to us. In any case, we have decided to follow their advice.

Our bindery is well-known for its success and efficiency. To my mind the secret of all this lies in the hard and honest labour by Haripada da and myself. I have no definite idea of Haripada da's earnings. I believe it will be nearly Rs.1400 a month. Indeed, the amount of labour, which he still does, should yield an earning of Rs.700 to a master workman of his quality and experience. Another Rs.700 can reasonably be his due for ownership and management.

I have never experienced any maltreatment from my owner. We are on the best of friendly terms. No worker has left our unit during the last ten years. It speaks well of Haripada da's treatment of all the workers in his bindery. I have been with him for about twenty-five years.

Haripada da has built a two-room house at Sree Colony of Jadavpur. It has thin brick walls and cement floors. The roof is tiled. Being childless Haripada da and his wife have adopted a poor boy.

I have told you how my life began in Calcutta. I was a helpless orphan. I believe I have done enough for one lifetime. I talk about all this with my wife. I feel sorry that we cannot have a son. I have no other grievances. We have a transistor radio to which my wife listens more than I can do. I purchase Bartaman, the daily Bengali newspaper which is mainly read by my wife and daughter. We go to cinema on two sundays every month. I wish to provide for my daughter's education upto the end of the secondary stage. I have purchased a plot of about six cottahs in Tapsia. I wish to build a house of my own within another five years. My wife worships the Goddess Lakshmi at home. Viswakarma Puja is an annual celebration in our bindery.

But for the unfulfilled desire for a son, I am now quite a happy man at the age of forty-six. The rising prices of daily needs are often alarming. If you ask me what are the things I wish to have on a rebirth, my answer will be parental love and care and a fair level of education.

The life-story of Haran<sup>1</sup> Sarkar presents the account of a displaced Hindu boy from East Bengal growing into a contented workman firstly under the order of a Muslim owner-worker and then in service to a Hindu owner-worker who buys the bindery from its former Muslim owner. We have evidence of sustained cooperation between an owner-worker and his hired labourer. There is also the significant account of a Muslim owner-worker who stays without formal Indian citizenship in Calcutta to manage his bindery in daftaripara for about sixteen years after independence and partition of the country.

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Adhir Chanda is now forty-four. He works in a khata-binding unit of Patwarbagan. He is a semi-workman (nim karigar). The unit has seven regular workers. The owner of the unit does not take part in direct labour.

Adhir's parents left their native place in East Bengal soon after the country's partition. He was then one year old. They were two brothers and one sister. The sister is the eldest. She was married in Calcutta. Her husband worked in National Rubber. He died suddenly of asthma. She has two sons and now lives by working as a maid-servant. Adhir's younger brother works in a small unit which makes tubelights.

Coming to Calcutta, Adhir's parents took shelter in a shack at Palmer Bazar. They still live in the same place. His father made bamboo handles for umbrellas. Adhir's mother worked as a sorter of paper-scrap in Patwarbagan. They lived in utter poverty and Adhir came to work at the age of twelve. His father had thought that one could have good earnings from work in the binderies. Adhir Chanda gives the following account of his experience.

My mother worked in a unit engaged in picking and sorting of paper-scrap at Patwarbagan. One of her co-workers introduced me to the bindery where I started as a helper. It was 1958. I was given Rs.5 a week. I worked in this unit for about seven years and my earnings increased to Rs.45 a month. I went then to work at a bindery in Dum Dum. My monthly earnings increased from Rs.60 to Rs.90 a month through the five years I worked in that bindery. In the subsequent twelve years I worked in three more binderies. It was seven years at a bindery in Gomez Lane near the Prachi Cinema, two

years at one unit in Baithakkhana Road, and three years at another unit in Surya Sen Street. Through all these years my monthly earnings could reach Rs.275 a month.

I then became the working partner of a bindery. This unit was located in Sarkar Bazar, Belegghata. The arrangement was based on a contract of 50 per cent of the earnings for each partner. The other provided the room and machines. I would secure orders and work for their execution. This yielded a monthly earning of Rs.500 to Rs.600. The arrangement did not last beyond four years. My partner did not trust me and created troubles. I had to quit.

I joined this present bindery six months ago. I earn Rs.80 a week. There has been no break in my working during the last six months. But the unit is about to face a dull period of business. I may have no work for some days. I am paid on a daily work basis. No work on a particular day means no earning. I receive no payment for sundays when the bindery is closed.

This khata-binding unit gets orders from banks. The owner lives in Kudghat. He is not a direct labourer. One workman is in charge of the bindery. He has a monthly salary of Rs.335 and gets payment for sundays plus twentyone paid holidays in a year.

I married in 1967. The bride's father worked with my father. They came from East Bengal after the partition and settled at Purbasthali in the Bardhaman district. My father-in-law could purchase some lands. One of his sons works at a bindery in daftaripara. Another son works in an oil mill. No dowry in cash was received by me. Some ornaments were given to my wife.



We have three sons. The eldest is eighteen and works as a spray-painter. He earns about Rs.240 a month. The second son is fourteen. He does not yet have any gainful work. The youngest son is aged ten. He is a victim of mental disorder verging on madness. We live in utter economic distress. The weekly expenses of my family amount to Rs.125 in the least. Out of the eighty rupees I earn every week, about Rs.30 is required for my cost of transport, tiffin and bidi. It is then feasible to spend Rs.50 for household needs. The eldest son makes a weekly contribution of Rs.45. There is the pressure to go for a loan of Rs.25 to Rs.30 each week. It moves in a vicious circle of repayment and a fresh loan from week to week.

Moreover, I have an outstanding loan of Rs.2000. I incurred this loan to conduct the unit which I had undertaken on a working partnership. The loan was taken from a private source on an interest of 10 per cent per month. I could make regular repayments through the period when my working partnership lasted. No repayment has been possible during the last six months. My wife received just a few ornaments from her father. I have mortgaged even those ornaments to have some more loans which still remain unpaid.

It is no use thinking of an alternative which is better than bindery work. I have no opportunities for such a shift. In my economic position, I cannot go again for contractual assignment which may yield better earnings. I am not connected with any political party. It is better to have such connections that may help a person to get good jobs.

My wife looks after the household. She is not an earner. But for our youngest son's mental disorder, our family has no other element of discord. My duty hours are from

8 A.M. to 5 P.M. with an hour's recess for tiffin. I have a transistor radio at home. We are regular listeners. I am very fond of hearing folk songs. It is usually once in four months that we go to a cinema show. I am a firm believer in gods. I have obtained my religious initiation from a preceptor.

Our eldest son is very good. He will marry according to the choice of my wife and myself. I have only one desire. I wish to live in a better dwelling place with my family at a reasonable level of living.

Adhir Chanda comes from a very poor family that migrated to West Bengal after the partition of the country. He is used to extreme poverty for many years. Adhir has a paltry weekly income of Rs. 380 and says, 'It is no use thinking of an alternative which is better than bindery work. I have no opportunities for such a shift'. Adhir's only source of help is his elder son who works as a spray-painter on a monthly earning of Rs. 240.

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Ahmed Kamal is an Urdu speaking Muslim. He is the workman of a small bookbinding unit in Baithakkhana Road. The unit is owned by a Bengali Hindu. There are three apprentices (sagred). Two of them are Urdu speaking Muslims, and one is a Hindu woman who is next to Kamal in position and seniority. The unit has two child workers, one aged six and another eight. They are also Urdu speaking. The workers speak in Urdu among themselves. Indeed, working with them, the Bengali woman worker also speaks a language which is a queer mix of Bengali and Urdu.

Ahmed Kamal lives in Rajabazar. He is the youngest of four brothers. The eldest brother has a business unit engaged in picking and sorting of paper scraps. The second brother works as the machine man of a printing press. The third brother works in a khata-binding unit. All their work places are in daftaripara. They have two sisters who are younger than Kamal. Their father died when Kamal was only ten. Their mother died three years ago. Ahmed Kamal, who is now twentyfour, states the course of events of his live and work as follows.

It is now seventeen years that I have been working in daftaripara. Since I gave no attention to studies, my father put me to work at the age of seven. All my elder brothers were still engaged in the studies. They came to work later than I did. While working as a 'boy' I was made to do odd jobs of all kind and the owner would often give me a severe thrashing.

All this prompted me to learn work as fast as possible. I have worked in six to seven places in course of the last seventeen years. Initially, I got Rs.30 a month. Next year it was raised to Rs.40 and then in the third year to Rs.50. By the age of fifteen I had a monthly earning of Rs.170. I now earn about Rs.500 a month. I have been working in this unit for three years. My appointment is on a regular salary basis. I receive payment for sundays plus four to five holidays on the occasion of Muslim festivals. There are paid holidays during the Durga Puja. The days of 'bandh' are treated as paid leave.

The owner is frequently absent in this bindery. I am given all responsibility. I have to keep ready the supplies which are due for delivery to customers. The owner

explains the orders to me. All other workers obey my directions. During the peak seasons the owner is present in the bindery. Usually I don't talk with the customers. The owner does. He is not aloof from us in his attitude and behaviour. We receive advances on request. Some tiffin is provided in case of overtime work. The daily tiffin hour lasts from 1 P.M. to 2 P.M.

I take a payment of Rs.80 every week and the balance of my monthly salary is received in the last week of each month. I make a weekly contribution of Rs.60 towards family expenses. Our second brother contributes the same amount and the third brother gives Rs.80 a week. The bulk of all family burden is borne by our eldest brother. The family consists of eight members.

Our rented house has two rooms. The rent is Rs.30 per month plus Rs.75 as electricity charges. We have one electric fan and a tubelight. All our brothers and sisters live in this house. The sisters read at home. They don't go to schools. I have never read in a school. I can't read or write. Our sisters wear salwar and kamij. They may use saris after their marriage.

We have rice in the day and chapati at night. Both with rice and chapati we have fried and cooked vegetable. This is often combined with beef or eggs. We consume the rice available in the ration shop.

I have more disposable money in the last week of a month and the beginning of the next. This is when I make miscellaneous purchases and buy my clothes. I have four trousers, four shirts, two lungis and two genjis. I ~~also~~ have a wrist watch. All members of the family have new clothes at the time of Id. My eldest brother observes roza.



There is additional expenditure during this month to ensure that he can have good fruits, better food and milk. No qurbani is offered at baqar id. We can't afford. One should not offer qurbani by incurring debt. Our eldest brother goes to the mosque for regular prayers (namaj).

Once or twice a week I go to a cinema. I like the faster films more than the slow stuff. I see Hindi and English films. I don't know English. But the films can be understood from their visual sequence of events. My visits to Metro, Lighthouse, Jamuna, Globe and New Empire are quite frequent.

I am not a radio listener. One day cricket matches and 'chitrahar' are seen by me in the T.V. I am also a viewer of good films. I go to the playground to see football matches. I am a supporter of Mohammedan Sporting.

I have many friends in the locality. We go together to several notable spots in Calcutta. On occasions we make pleasure trips to places like Digha or Patna. We have some friends living in Patna. I don't smoke. Nor do I drink. We keep away from those young men who are known to be heroin addicts.

I fell in love with a girl. I cannot marry before the marriage of my two elder brothers. It will take about ten more years. The girl cannot wait so long. I told her frankly about the situation. Our love came to an end after seven months.

I don't think of shifting to any other line of work. It will take at least a year to learn a new activity. There are no problems at present when my elder brothers share the family burden. I am worried of the future when a new life will begin after my marriage. I can see that the earnings of bindery workmen are hardly sufficient for

living with one's wife and children in reasonable comfort.

Ahmed Kamal has become a full workman at an early age and appears to be quite well-off by the standard of workers of daftaripara. He lives together with his three elder brothers who are all earners. This explains the relative ease of Kamal's way of life and his expenditure on pleasure trips and entertainment. Their family has the tradition of religious practice which is strictly followed by Ahmed Kamal's eldest brother. The family appears to have migrated to West Bengal in the past. This is suggested by their use of Urdu, food and dress habits. Kamal is apprehensive of his future. He can see the insufficiency of his earnings for the maintenance of his own family after marriage.

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Safiuddin Laskar's native village is Uttarkesali in Magrahat of South 24 Parganas. His father, who is fiftyfive, works in a jute mill. Safiuddin's elder brother works in a bindery. This elder brother does work on his own account. He has arrangements for occupying a room rented by someone else and works out the orders which he secures for himself. Safiuddin's four sisters are all married. The husband of the eldest sister has a tea shop. The second sister's husband is an itinerant buyer of old iron, steel and glass and sells those things at Kanchrapara. The third brother-in-law (sister's husband) worked before in a bakery. He is now engaged in cultivation. The husband of the youngest sister is engaged in electrical work.

(13) Safiuddin is now twentysix (1988). He works in a ruling workshop which has four regular workers. He came for work to daftaripara in 1977. His studies were discontinued at the Class V stage. He gave up after failing for two consecutive years in the Class V examination. His elder brother was then in Assam. He sent no contribution to their family. Safiuddin had to come for earning under such circumstances. His account runs as follows.

I was brought to daftaripara by a cousin. It was 1977. My cousin worked first in ruling and then shifted to a bindery. Though he is one year my younger, my cousin started work in daftaripara before me. I had no idea of what was good and bad in the work at daftaripara.

I worked for only three days in the first workshop I had joined. I stayed for three months in the unit I joined next. Suffering from boils I left for home. This led to the termination of my work. I could then find out work in a unit which paid me Rs.10 a week. My dues were not paid on Saturdays. The owner paid the workers on Sundays. My elder brother returned by then from Assam. I could stay with him and lived at his expense. He had started work in binderies. I left the place where the weekly payment was held up till Sundays. It was already five months that I had begun work in daftaripara.

I worked then for one year in a workshop where I received a monthly earning of Rs.60. This workshop was sold out. In the next unit I joined, the monthly pay was fixed at Rs.75. I had to leave for home due to an attack of typhoid fever. After my cure, my elder brother set up a sandal shop for my earning. The shop was a failure. I returned to this locality and joined work

in a unit on a monthly pay of Rs.160. My earning increased to Rs.250 per month.

After a year I came to this present place of work at Rs.300 a month. As a result of the strike of 1985 in ruling units, my monthly earnings increased to Rs.370. Such an increase was among the demands of the strikers. When my pay increased to Rs.420 a month, I went to work in my elder brother's bindery. I was there for three years. My elder brother's shop failed to carry on. I came back to this ruling unit at Rs.450 a month. This is my present earning as a workman.

Before coming to daftaripara I worked in a grocer's shop for six months. For three months I worked as a tailor. I also worked in a lathe machine workshop near College Square for a month. I was accompanied by a friend who did not continue in the lathe machine work. I also left to come back to the ruling unit.

I have worked outside daftaripara. When no work could be secured here I moved to work in more prominent Hindu localities like Chatu Babu Bazar, Sobhabazar Tarigali, Sasthitala etc. Also in our native village I have many Hindu friends. Both Hindus and Muslims share the same kitchen in the work unit where I now work. This creates no difficulties.

My present employer runs the unit on contract. The room is owned by a Hindu. The employer has a cycle shop in Gopalpur hat of South 24 Parganas. He often stays away from the ruling unit. In his absence I bear the responsibility of securing orders for work and negotiations with the customers. The employer is aged about forty. Formerly he regularly took part in direct labour. Now he works as a direct labourer only in case of shortage of men. He is a Muslim workman of the ruling line. When he stays here, his food is separately cooked with the help of a 'boy'.



We are members of the union affiliated with CITU. There are eighteen days of scheduled festival leave with pay every year. I enjoy paid leave on sundays.

Outside working hours I spend time in sundry conversations with the four co-workers who also stay in the unit. We share the same kitchen. If anyone of us falls ill, the other co-workers take care of the person. The employer gives no special assistance for such contingencies. I have respect for the employer. But my conduct remains the same whether the employer is present or not.

Our joint family in the village is maintained on contributions from my father, elder brother and myself. I contribute about Rs.250 every month. The balance of my earnings is required for all my other expenses in Calcutta.

We have about 16 cottahs of arable lands in the village. Annually some 24 maunds of paddy are raised from own cultivation. Some poultry production is also done on a small scale. All this is of help for the maintenance of our joint family. I can do some agricultural work and often join in some parts of our own cultivation in the village.

I married eight years ago. My wife is the daughter of a distant cousin (sister) of my mother. We have no children. We have taken medical advice and my wife is under some treatment. My wife is now aged eighteen.

Usually, when I go home every week-end, I take with me some snacks of Rs.8 to Rs.10. I have a separate room in my village home. In Calcutta, I see a cinema show once in two to three weeks. I am fond of reading stories, fairy tales and books of knowledge.

The busy season of our work comes at the time of Bengali New Year, Diwali, and the English New Year. One shift of 'night' (overtime) work fetches an extra earning of Rs.14. There is more demand for ruling work when the shops and banks renew their registers and account books.

I think of alternatives for better earning. I have a strong desire to start fresh business. It requires a lot of resources. I am not in a position to make large savings.

Safiuddin presents the example of a young worker whose economic burden is lessened by other members in the family and arable lands in its possession. He is married. Safiuddin is the workman of a ruling workshop at a monthly pay of Rs.450. He is a member of the CITU union. Safiuddin stays the whole week in his workshop and goes home every weekend. He has no resources to start an alternative business. In case of need, Safiuddin has worked in prominent Hindu localities outside daftaripara.

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Kashem Ali Molla comes from the village Bhatara of Haora district. He is the only son of his parents. His father died eight years ago. Kashem is now forty-four. He has no sisters. His father was a carpenter. Kashem could knit well all kinds of net for catching fishes. While working in daftaripara he still knits in his spare time scoop-net and draw-net which are in demand among bindery workers who catch fishes in their own village ponds or in common tanks.

Kashem Ali Molla is a lame man. He cannot do all parts of agricultural work. Nor can he do the more arduous tasks of carpentry which was his father's occupation. His seven uncles were also carpenters. One uncle was a polish-worker. After his father's death Kashem Ali faced financial difficulties. His father left two acres of agricultural lands. His physical handicap stood in the way of his having an adequate income from agriculture alone. He tells us of how he combines his earnings at the bindery with some returns from agriculture.

It is now four years that I have come to work in a bindery. I have proved myself quite adept at binding work. In four years my skill excels that of the people working for a much longer period. I am now a full workman. On an average I earn Rs.450 a month. This bindery gets large orders from some fairly big publishers. There is no sufficient storing space. Hence those orders are served by us in instalments. .

I stay in the bindery where I work. There are three more workers living here. We share a common kitchen. I spend about Rs.60 a week. This covers my daily food, tiffin and cost of bidi. I go to sleep at ten in the night. When I play cards with other bindery workers, the hour of going to bed is deferred till midnight. The working hours in the bindery are from eight in the morning to five in the evening. One hour's tiffin recess is from 1 P.M.

I don't offer regular prayers (namaj). Nor do I observe roza. In politics I am a supporter of CPM. During the Congress rule I was once a victim of police harrassment in Calcutta. I was given such trouble for a very minor offence. Since then I always vote for CPM. My studies stopped in Class VI.

One man sat with us when Kashem was narrating his account. He is a close relative of Kashem and works in another bindery in the neighbourhood. At this point of the narrative he commented that Kashem could not carry on his studies because he became an alcohol addict at an early age. Kashem looked ashamed and continued with his account.

This is really a great shame for me.  
Please do not disclose my gross default.

When I was only fifteen, my father arranged my marriage. He thought my mother required someone to help her in household work. An uncle protested against my early marriage. My father's reply was that he would bear all responsibility for our proper maintenance. My first wife died of cancer seven years ago. She mothered two sons and a daughter. I married for the second time some years after my first wife's death. My second wife left me within six months after our marriage. I had my third wife a year ago. She has given birth to a daughter. My mother is alive. She is sixty-five and can still look after the cultivation of our lands through the year.

The cultivation of our six and half bighas of land grows aman rice, high yielding boro rice and potatoes. Aman rice is grown on four bighas, HYV boro on three bighas and potatoes and radish on one and half bighas of lands. We don't sell much of rice. Our consumption requirements through the year are met from this source. We need no purchases. Some part of the potatoes are sold. We have no suitable storage facilities. In some parts of the year we have to buy potatoes for household consumption.



When I had no wife, I went to my village home once in two months. It is now once in a month or a fortnight. There are times when I go every week-end. I make a weekly contribution between Rs.50 and Rs.70 to my village home. I also bear all the expenses of cultivation. My eldest son read upto Class V. He works as a tailor in Budge Budge. My daughter learns Arabic from her step-mother, my third wife, who knows Bengali and Arabic.

Previously, I went to cinema once in a week. It is more infrequent these days. There is no radio in our bindery. Nor do I have one at my village home. I am addicted to alcohol. It is however much less than before. I smoke cigarettes and bidi. My movements are restricted to my own home, my father-in-law's place and that of a few close relatives. I have seen some places in Calcutta. We live in complete harmony between Hindus and Muslims in daftaripara.

Though physically handicapped, Kashem Ali Molla is quite adept at bindery work. He has become a full workman within four years after joining work at a bindery in daftaripara. He goes to his village home every week-end, or once in a fortnight. Kashem lives at his work-place in Calcutta. He and his family enjoy the benefit of good returns from own lands. Kashem Ali supports the CPI(M) and makes special mention of Hindu-Muslim harmony in daftaripara. His eldest son has joined tailoring work after reading upto class V. He is no strict observer of religious rituals.

Habib Mia is now more than seventy years old. He is attached to no unit any longer. Habib was once a master workman in a ruling workshop. He still has to earn for his family. Habib keeps himself in touch with all ruling units where he gets temporary work in case of their sudden need for more labour or in the absence of regular workers. He works at a daily rate which is slightly lower than that of the regular workers.

Habib Mia came from his native place in Dacca at the age of ten. He joined work towards the end of 1920's. For the first six months he lived at his own expense to learn work. Habib then began at a monthly earning of Rs.12. His account is full of laments for the loss of an old world which he situates in the days before independence.

I had two brothers and two sisters. I don't know if some of them are still alive. Many Muslims left for East Pakistan after partition. I decided not to leave Calcutta. On one occasion a local officer asked me, 'How long are you resident in this country?' I could not tell him anything definite about the number of years. I had an old rent receipt which was shown to the officer. I could secure Indian citizenship.

Latif Uddin was my master. The ruling business was then in very good shape. Ruling work was reputed for its level of skill. When I began work there were less than ten ruling units in this locality. They used to do ruling work under the cover of screens. It was a device to maintain secrecy about the work-methods. I became a master workman by the middle of 1940s. I have never undertaken a unit on contract.

I married at the age of twenty-one. I had then a monthly earning of Rs.60. My father-in-law was engaged in cultivation. He gave me a gold ring and Rs.500. They lived in East Bengal. Their relatives were in Calcutta. The girl was brought to Calcutta for her marriage. I arranged a feast for about sixty persons.

We were three brothers living in a rented room in the neighbouring Sahebbagan. Subsequently, each of us set up separate households and my brothers left for East Pakistan after the country's partition. I still live in that old room in Sahebbagan. The present rent is Rs.17 per month. I live with my three sons. They all work in the ruling line. The eldest son is married. He has a son and two daughters. The same room is shared by all.

I now get work for ten to twelve days in a month. I work at a daily rate of Rs.18. I keep a small amount for my tea and bidi expenses. The rest of my earnings are contributed towards household expenditure. Usually our meals are rice or chapati along with fried and cooked vegetables. We cannot regularly afford to have fish or meat. We have beef once a week. I have not been able to give proper education to my sons. All my sons do ruling work which they have learnt through direct practice.

I can remember the days when a seer of rice could be purchased between two or four annas. A tiffin of one pice was substantial. I once had enough fish and milk. All this is now a thing of the past. Those days the officers of the Calcutta Corporation regularly visited the local eating houses to inspect the quality of food. They are now full of rotten vegetables and bad food.

Earlier, we used to see 'silent bioscope'. There was a great stir when the 'talkie films' were first shown. Some of the earliest films I had seen were 'Sagar Samsar', 'Laila Majnu', 'Chandidas', 'Bilwa Mangal' and 'Siri Farhad'. The prices of tickets were much lower those days.

Our country was different. We have driven away the English. There is no food, nor regular employment. People can once make a revolution and fight for freedom, But food is our daily need. Those who are ruling the country don't tell us how will people survive in a land without food.

True the country has passed through a radical transfer of power, an inquilab. But both the CPM and the Congress have gone wrong. The Congress has committed the larger mistake. Their lead took the country to inquilabi. And thus the state of ruling business has been ruined by the spread of offset printing.

I know no other work. I still work to help my sons. The eldest takes some care of me. At present, the owners of ruling units are mostly indistinguishable from workers. They cannot help workers in need of some urgent aid. I worked with more resourceful owners. If they were present today, I could live in dependence on them. All the people who had learnt work as my apprentices (sagred) left for East Bengal.

I have little sleep at night. For the last seven or eight years I have been living in this manner. On many days, I just move from unit to unit and go round the market in search of some work. My earnings can be of use to the joint family. Our family has always lived in distress since independence.



Habib Mia is an old man of more than seventy. He opted not to leave Calcutta for East Pakistan (now Bangla Desh) after the country's partition. The account tells us of Habib Mia's bitter experience about rising prices, shrinking employment and growing distress. He is now an angry man disapproving of things that have happened since independence. So much so that he sees a proximate relation between independence and the incursion of offset printing to dislodge ruling work.

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Anila Chatterjee lives in Naihati and is a daily commuter to Calcutta for work in daftaripara. She is aged forty. Not many women workers in daftaripara, are employed in the core job of binding. They are mostly engaged in stitching work on piece rates. Anila however is a full workperson in a small book-binding unit. The owner of this unit is Bipin Das whose life story has been presented in the previous sub-section on owner-workers. The unit has two hired adult workers and one 'boy'. There is a nim-karigar (semi-workman). The child worker is a girl. The owner of the unit is also a direct labourer.

Anila has been working in this bindery continuously for ten years. She looked for work from the age of twenty. In the beginning she worked as a compositor in a printing press. The payments were extremely meagre. She persuaded a Muslim workman to train her in binding work. She faced difficulties in having a job in daftaripara. Anila had a cousin living in a rented room in Patwarbagan. He tried to get an appointment for Anila. He was told by many owners that

a female workperson would certainly condemn a bindery. Anila once left her job after an initial period of work for one and a half year. Her account narrates the experience of a cruel unfaithful husband whom she quits and proceeds to earn her livelihood from bindery work.

I have no relation with my husband. **It** is fourteen years that I have left my husband's place. He worked in the military service. My husband was absolutely unrestrained in his addiction to wine and women. He lived with a mistress. I left my husband after the birth of my first son. My mother-in-law made an attempt to restore our relation by persuading me to return to my husband. A second son was born to us. I could not live with my husband, who often beat me. With two children, I left my husband's place never to return again.

My father worked in a jute mill. He died at the age of forty. Our eldest brother was then sixteen years and I was only seven. Our father left no large amounts of money for us. The uncles divided our house in Naihati. Our mother sold her ornaments to bring us up. My marriage was arranged with some care and expenditure. But I found no happiness even for a night. I could read upto Class VI. Despite my desire and keenness it was impossible to continue my studies because of extreme poverty.

My elder brother brought me back from my husband's place. Both my elder and younger brothers got married in course of time and settled with their own families. They could no longer look after me and my sons. For some years I lived by selling ornaments.

One of our brothers was mentally deranged. He was dependent on me. During the early days of my search for work in daftaripara I had 150 grams of chatu and took home this same food for my sons.

My second son would be sixteen by now. He died of meningitis. The first son has read upto B.Com. He has not passed the examination. He now works in a small poultry farm. It is with great hardship that I have provided for his education. In the beginning I spent almost half of my meagre monthly earnings for his books, tuition etc. All this will be rewarded when he secures a good job. He is always on the lookout for an opportunity. My husband now feels jealous of the son's sole attachment to me.

I earn Rs.400 per month. Bipin da (the owner) and I work together in the bindery. He asserts no undue authority. We are on good terms. Bipin da shares for his tiffin the food I bring from home. The duty hour begins at nine in the morning. Sometimes I get late because of some urgent household work or late running of trains. Such delay in starting work is made up by my working after the closing hours in the evening. I have very good relations with all people in and around my work-place. No distinction is made in this regard between Hindus and Muslims.

I try to help people in their difficulties. I look after anyone falling ill in the locality. The nim karigar of our bindery is just seventeen. I requested Bipin da to purchase a genji for him. The girl of thirteen, who works as a 'boy' in our bindery, was moving about in search of work. Bipin da responded to my request for employing her. Even in Naihati I have the habit of rushing to the help of anyone in

trouble. My means are extremely limited. But anyone in distress draws my attention.

Once Bipin da was in great trouble for binding a book published by some Naxalites. He was arrested and put in police lock-up for more than a month. I used to make regular enquiries about him and looked after the proper upkeep of this bindery during his absence. I had to make repeated efforts to find him out in the lock-up of the police station at Lebutala.

Notwithstanding our long familiarity I always show proper respect to Bipin da as our owner. I never move around the locality just for gossip and gabbling. Moreover, it is better to remain careful in the area which is full of all sorts of people.

Every week I get Rs.100 from the owner. The amount is spent to purchase provisions for the household. The widow of an elder brother, who died young, lives with me. I give her the money for weekly purchases from the ration shop and the grocer. I purchase vegetable etc. from the market to meet the day to day food requirements.

I cannot bear the cost of fish or meat. Occasionally, the owner gives me some extra payments which I can spend on having fish for a day or two. I buy clothes for my son and myself on receipt of annual bonus payment from the 'company' (i.e. owner). Usually, I travel in trains without a ticket. In times of overtime work and payments I purchase a monthly ticket covering the distance from Dum Dum to Sealdah (note that she travels the much longer distance between Naihati and Sealdah).

I live in one room of my parental house. It is also shared by the widow of my dead brother. A sister-in-law (wife of another brother) does not allow us to have water from the tap within the house. We have to carry



water from the tap on the road outside the house. Our room lies in a precarious condition due to lack of repairs.

I live by my work. I have no regrets for having left my husband. There is no question of a reunion. It suits me to live with my daily round of work, modest meals, rest and sleep. On holidays I wash clothes and do room cleaning. In the evening I may either visit some relatives or go to a cinema. My only concern is about my son getting a good job. He makes applications for vacancies which are notified in the newspapers. I don't look forward to living with my son and daughter-in-law. It will be good enough for me to see him have a good job and then getting married.

I have a transistor radio at home. I listen to plays, 'bibidha bharati', 'Boroliner Samsar' and many other items. Such are my entertainments. I like Hindi films for their plenty of music and dance, violent clashes and bloodshed. It is really satisfying to see how smugglers and looters of black money are knocked down. Equally enthralling are the instances of punishment and retribution of criminals who roll about in their ill-gotten wealth behind the guise of power and respectability. When you see the triumph of good over evil, can you want anything more ?

Anila Chatterjee tells us of her unceasing struggle for survival. She appears to have borne all this with courage and energy. Anila's habit of helping others persists in the midst of all her own hardship. She works in a small book-binding unit where the owner is a direct labourer. She has the best of terms and understanding with the owner-worker. Anila has ecstatic appreciation of films which she hails as the portrayal of the triumph of good over

evil. It may be an oblique expression of her own protest which finds no other outlet.

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Amal Kumar Ghosh is fortyfour. He was in East Bengal, at his native village of Fingri in the Satkhira subdivision of Khulna. At the age of eighteen in 1963 he came to see Calcutta and put up with a sister who was already living in the city. Amal joined binding work within a few days after his arrival in Calcutta. The younger brother of his sister's husband managed to fix Amal in this bindery. This is a large unit of more than twentyfive regular workers. It has regular business from some big publishers of Calcutta. Amal narrates the following account of his life and work. He has always worked in the same bindery.

I began work on a piece rate basis. My monthly earning was between Rs.20 and Rs.25. I got a permanent appointment after the 1964 riots. I was given the job of an apprentice (sagred). My monthly pay was Rs.40. In two to three years I became a workman on Rs.50 a month. My present pay is Rs.470 per month.

I stayed in my sister's house for six months. Her husband died before I came to Calcutta. Her husband's younger brother looked after her. I went then to stay for a year with a first cousin (paternal uncle's son), in Baranagar. This work place was my residence for several years. In the mid 1970's I built my own house in Barasat. The house has two rooms of brick walls and tiled

roof. I married a year after the construction of the house. My marriage was arranged by my sister and her mother-in-law. My wife is the daughter of a distant niece of my employer. I received no dowry. My wife read upto class VIII. I stopped my studies in class VI.

I had been to East Bengal in 1967 and 1971. I secured no property in East Bengal. My father was a government employee. He died in 1965. But for one younger brother who lives in Bangladesh, none of my other brothers and sisters are now alive. The brother in Bangladesh earns his livelihood from a small cultivation holding and by offering private tuition to primary students.

My father-in-law worked in police. He is now retired. The eldest brother-in-law is in service, and the second has a shop. Two brothers of my wife are still unemployed after ceasing their studies. They all live in Calcutta.

I have two daughters and a son. Both the son and the eldest daughter read in Class V. The son is two years younger than his elder sister. The youngest daughter reads in Class II. I cant provide for their private coaching. They can have the necessary books and exercise-books. A son of my deceased elder brother lives with me. He came from East Bengal in 1980. Aged about twenty three, this nephew works in a bindery at Mirzapore. I have fixed him in this work. He has one meal at our house and gives me Rs.60.

My monthly ticket for train travel costs Rs.40. After having tea and bread I come to my work place by eight in the morning. At nine in the morning I have tea in course of work and also some light snacks. I have my mid-day meal with the

owner of the bindery. No close relatives live with him. I render him a lot of sundry service and take the trouble of going to market for the purchase of his day to day provisions. I am also distantly related to him on my wife's side. I make a small monthly payment of Rs.40 for the mid-day meal.

What I earn is spent for the family expenses. I earn about Rs.700 to Rs.800 per month, inclusive of overtime payments. The only savings are made through the Provident Fund arrangements of the company and my own monthly contribution of Rs.10 to the 'thrift fund' of workers. I do some outdoor work for the company. This includes visit to customers, serving bills and receiving payments, arranging delivery of books, and enquiring at the press about the progress of printing.

I return home in the train which leaves Sealdah at 5-30 p.m. In case of overtime work I go back in the train leaving at 10-45 p.m. We eat fish on sundays. On other days the food consists of rice, vegetable and pulses. I spend about Rs.7.30 for a hundred grams of snuff which is used by me over two months.

I have no faith in any politics. I don't even cast my vote these days. It is a bother to wait in the sun for casting your vote. I have secured religious initiation from a preceptor of the Belur Math. I have travelled to some extent in the districts of Medinipur, Haora and Hugli. These days I never go a cinema. My annual bonus is spent on purchases during the Puja festival and on necessary repairs to the house.

I think of setting up some separate business of my own. I don't have sufficient means for a beginning. As I grow old, it won't be possible to bear the strain of such long hours of work and of commuting daily



from Barasat to Calcutta. I shall educate my children so far as I can afford to do. It depends on their own efforts as well. You cannot force anyone to proceed with studies.

Amal Kumar Ghosh presents the case of a bindery worker in a large organised unit. His monthly earnings are in the range of highest pay for bindery workers. Still with four dependents in the family Amal is living just a little above the level of minimum subsistence. The hours of work are extremely long and arduous for Amal who commutes daily from Barasat. His desire for a change is evident.

\* \* \*

Gopal Hazra comes from Nakarpur, a village under the Falta police station in South 24 Parganas. He works in a large bindery of daftaripara. It employs a regular labour force of thirty workers. This unit is a private limited company. Along with two other workers Gopal lives in a rented room at Sitaram Ghosh Street. One of them is a co-worker of Gopal. The third man is also a bindery worker. His work-place is located in Shyambazar. The room bears a monthly rent of Rs.42. The additional amounts of Rs.10 and Rs.6 are to be paid for electricity charges and a sweeper respectively. The whole amount of rent and other charges is shared by the three occupants. The rent receipt is issued in favour of Gopal Hazra. Gopal has been living in this room since 1964.

Gopal Hazra read upto class IX in his village school. He could not do further studies due to their family's economic distress. Their joint family of fathers and uncles broke into fragments. They were all dependent on agriculture. The total lands possessed by the joint family were divided among all claimants. The shares were insufficient for raising even a minimum livelihood. Gopal has three brothers and three sisters. One younger brother works in cultivation. One is a high school teacher. The youngest works at the J.L.R.O. office. While a school student he had separate training in methods of survey. The husbands of all his sisters work in cultivation. Gopal's own account of his life and work is as follows.

I came in search of work in 1962 at the age of fourteen. A school friend of mine had already joined bindery work. He secured work for me. Thus I began work at the bindery where my friend was already working. It was a press-cum-bindery unit. I was given the cost of my food. I would get a salary only after learning to do the work. There were no scheduled hours of work. I worked all the time except for the hours of sleep. It was from eight in the morning to ten at night. This was followed on some occasions by further overtime work. Within a year I was fixed at a monthly payment of Rs.30. I stayed in that bindery.

I looked for work elsewhere with a view to learning superior qualities of binding. This gave me the first opportunity of working in the bindery where I am currently employed. I was known to many workers in this bindery. They helped in getting a job for me. After a year I left to join another bindery. I had a monthly earning of Rs.70. There I worked till 1971 when my monthly earnings increased to Rs.105.

I came back to this bindery in 1970. Since then I have continuously worked here without any break. The master workman of this bindery advised me to join this company. Recently he has set up his own bindery in Belegkata. My present salary is Rs.440 a month. I am a workman. Adding overtime payments, my monthly earning is between Rs.600 and Rs.700.

My own experience tells me that a large bindery works at a much higher level of efficiency than smaller units. We work here in a gang of five workers. A gang of five can finish a job process in one hour. A single worker takes more than ten hours to complete the same job. In case of gang work each member is assigned to a particular stage of the entire process. All the stages are so interlinked that each worker impels another to work at a pace that should be enough for their unhindered coordination. Moreover, the machinery and tools in use at a large workshop are much better than those in the smaller units of bindery.

I married in 1972. My maternal uncle arranged the marriage. I received no dowry. My wife read upto class III. We have three daughters and two sons. The eldest daughter is twelve and reads in class V. Others are in class III and class II.

I go home every saturday and return to work on monday. I look after the cultivation of my one acre of land. I dont take part in labour for cultivation. Both aman and boro cultivation are done with hired labour. In good years the crop is large enough to meet the yearly needs of our family consumption. My own expenditure in Calcutta amounts to about Rs.250 per month. But for Rs.5 to Rs.10 in some weeks, I make no cash payments to my family in the village. I purchase in Calcutta their whole week's requirements and take all

those things home every saturday. I have tiny shares of trees, orchards and ponds in the village.

I cannot go for overtime work in any other bindery. This is not possible because I have to do my own cooking. The annual bonus of Rs.500 to Rs.600 is mainly spent on the Puja purchase of clothes. There are further expenses on children's education and clothes. I have never travelled to any distant place. I have moved around Calcutta on some holidays.

Rarely do I go to a cinema. I may see a film once a year. I read religious books when some time can be found for reading. I have borne the responsibility of bringing up my brothers. One of my brothers is now a teacher. I provided for his education when my own monthly earning was only Rs.30. I don't smoke. I have one pan (betel leaf) a day.

My parents supported the Congress. I still support the same party. It is just support. I am never exercised over politics.

But for the provident fund arrangements of ~~our~~ company I can make no other savings. My village house has walls made of bamboo slips. It has not yet been possible to build up anything better. No desire can be fulfilled without money.

I have no intimate friends. It is no use planning for the future without the necessary means. I have to take half my pay as advance by the middle of a month.

I don't find my present earnings to be adequate for all my needs. We have talks directly with our employer on matters relating to work and also about our difficulties and grievances.



Gopal Hazra was forced by poverty to give up his studies when he had been reading in Class IX. He has the experience of working in both small and large binderies. Gopal now works at a unit which is organized as a private limited company. He tells from his own experience about the higher productivity of large units. He stays on working days in a rented room near daftaripara. The room and its rent are shared by Gopal and two other workers. Gopal goes to his home in Falta every week-end. He gets high wages by the standard of bindery workers. Still the support of supplementary agricultural income from own lands is essential for meeting the minimum needs of his family of six dependents.

\* \* \*

Satyendra Bhowmik has been a book-binder for the last twelve years. He is the third of their four brothers. Next to him is their only sister. The fourth brother is the youngest of them all. Their parents came from East Pakistan after the country's partition and settled in Gobindapur village of Hanskhali police station in Nadia. They had their original home in Beturia of Dacca and migrated to West Bengal immediately after their marriage. Satyendra, his brothers and their sister were all born in Gobindapur.

Satyendra's father had two sisters. Their husbands came along with their family from Bangla Desh about five years ago. They have acquired lands which are sufficient for their livelihood. The husband of Satyendra's sister works in cultivation. He also deals in chaff and barn.

Satyendra's eldest brother read upto class VIII. The other brothers had no opportunities for studies because of extreme poverty. Satyendra knows little more than the Bengali alphabet. He could proceed no further with his studies. They were in acute economic distress. The eldest brother was barely twenty years when their father died of tuberculosis.

In Gobindapur there was a neighbour whom they addressed as an uncle. They had no blood relationship. This man was a Brahmin who first brought Satyendra to the Patwarbagan area for bindery work. The man himself had the profession of a priest. He was the priest in charge of all rituals and worship to be performed on behalf of numerous families in central Calcutta. Let us then present the account narrated by Satyendra from the beginning of his work in daftaripara.

I started work at the age of fifteen in a book binding unit where I was given my daily food, and no cash payments. I stayed away from my house for a year. Another book binding unit, which was my next work place, gave me a monthly pay of Rs.60 and no food. I had my meals in a local hotel and slept at night on the open terrace of the bindery where I worked earlier. I had no clothes but for a half-pant and a genji.

I then joined a bindery in Baithakkhana Road. They gave me a monthly pay of Rs.100. This unit failed in business. I could work there for a year. A bindery in Patwarbagan was my next work place. I had a monthly pay of Rs.200. I worked there for three years. One day a Muslim lady saw me at the bindery. She asked me where I lived and whether I was ready to work in a printing press. She took me to the press which was owned by her. She did not allow me to work.

It was her view that I was still too young to be a press worker. I had some hesitation to have my food without doing any work. I could not refuse because she treated me almost like her son. She also gave me clothes.

Her son got me a job in a chemical factory. The factory was engaged in the manufacture of detergent. I had a monthly pay of Rs.280. But this factory failed in business. I returned to a book binding unit on a daily wage of Rs.14. I worked there for about four months and then joined the bindery where I am currently employed. This bindery has six regular workers, one workman (myself), one nim karigar (semi-workman), three apprentices (sagred), and a child worker. The owner does not take part in the labour process. I have been working in this unit for six years. I am now a full workman. I get a monthly pay of Rs.400 and my total earnings inclusive of overtime payments amount to about Rs.500. I am now thirtyone.

I live in the printing press owned by the Muslim lady. There are four rooms in their house of which one was allotted to me. But after the marriage of her two sons I shifted to the press because of their shortage of accommodation. Their native place is in Kushtia of Bangla Desh. Her four sons are in Kushtia. They have a lot of property in Kushtia --- a rice mill, arable lands and a medicine shop. The two sons, who live in Calcutta, look after the press. The husband of this lady died in Calcutta and his body was flown to Bangla Desh for burial in Kushtia.

I now cook my food separately in their kitchen. I cannot have ready food from their kitchen because it is about three in the afternoon when their cooking is completed. My duty hours in the bindery do not fit with such a timing. To avoid inconvenience, I cook my own food. The Muslim lady is still

full of affection for me. I have to take part in all their ceremonies. I don't have some of the food eaten by them. The sons have beef which they never offer me. The lady herself does not have beef, nor did her husband. I address her as mashima (i.e. mother's sister). She has never been to my native place. I invited her to come to my marriage. She could not come. One of her sons and a brother went to attend my invitation.

It is now four years that I married a girl of Arangghata. I lived alone in a house which I built in the Bankinagar colony of Ranaghat. My neighbours in Ranaghat told me to marry. I sought my mother's help in finding a bride for me. My mother did not cooperate. On my request, the neighbours at Ranaghat selected the bride and made all the arrangements. My father-in-law, who works in the railways, gave me Rs.3000, a wrist watch and a cycle. He gave his daughter a few gold ornaments.

Within a year and a half after my marriage I sold the Ranaghat house. My wife found it more and more difficult to live alone. I sent her to our family house in Gobindapur. The Ranaghat house was sold at Rs.1200. It was out of my own savings that I built the Ranaghat house. I spent Rs.1200 to build it. The plot of land was received under a government aid programme.

My youngest brother looks after our mother. He is still unmarried. The eldest brother works in cultivation and deals in jute. The second brother also works in cultivation. So does the youngest brother. I go home once a week. We have a daughter of two years.



I smoke bidi and cigarettes. I have no other addiction. I buy some rice, potatoes and papaw in Calcutta for my own food. My own expenses in Calcutta amount to Rs.230 per month. Such expenses include the cost of my monthly ticket, purchase of clothes for me and my family and other miscellaneous expenditure. I contribute Rs.250 towards my family expenses. I use kerosene as fuel for my cooking. I have fish once a week on sundays at home. I go to a cinema show once in six months. I have not travelled to any distant place. My wife suggests it now and then. But I have no means.

Satyendra has become a full workman at an early age. He has a small family. Satyendra stays in Calcutta on the working days and goes to his village home in the week-end. The role of a kind Muslim woman in Satyendra's life is quite significant.

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Abani Roy lives in Bamangachi on the Sealdah-Bangaon railway line. At the age of five in 1953 he came from East Bengal with his parents. Their native village Balikata was located in the Manikganj sub-division of Dacca. His father was the manager of a ferry service engaged in jute transport. They faced increasing difficulties after the partition. His two elder brothers came a year earlier and used to live in Bethuadahari of Nadia. They stayed in an uncle's (the husband of their mother's sister) house. Abani's eldest brother worked in that uncle's agricultural enterprise. The second brother read upto Class IX.

Abani and his parents lived on the platform of the Sealdah station for about two weeks. They were among the more than a hundred displaced families who were taken to Salbani in Medinipur and settled in a refugee camp within a forest. They had to stay in a tent and lived on rationed supplies of food and a weekly cash dole of Rs.6 per head. Abani's father made some earnings from selling the wood which he had by cutting trees in the forest.

Their family stayed in Salbani for twelve years. Abani read upto Class VIII. Every refugee family in Salbani was given three acres of land for cultivation and ten cottahs for homestead. The experience of frequent assaults by robbers compelled them to leave Salbani. They let out their arable lands on share-cropping. Abani goes once a year to Salbani to collect an amount of Rs.250 which the local people give them as their share of return from the cultivated lands.

They moved from Salbani to Bethuadahari. Abani could neither pay his school fees, nor buy the books necessary to continue studies. Their father had become old and could do nothing more than some sundry jobs. Nor did the sons allow him to do any work of regular routine and strain. Let us take up Abani's own account of his life and work from this point.

After giving up studies I worked in cultivation for a year. I came then to Calcutta with a person who was well acquainted with someone in Patwarbagan. No progress could be made in finding some suitable work in Patwarbagan. I met an officer of our Salbani camp. This officer was then staying in Kalyani. He drafted an application for me. I signed it and the officer assured me that a reply would

reach me within a fortnight. I received the letter for an interview and was selected for six months' training in power loom. During the training period I would be paid a monthly allowance of Rs.25. Thus a part of my cost of living had to be borne by me.

My elder brother arranged for my board and lodging in a household known to him. It was difficult for me to live on the meagre amounts of food which that household allotted for me. I moved to the staff quarters of a power loom. On the return of the person who was on leave, I was obliged to quit the quarters. I went to Halisahar where lived a person **distantly** related to me as a maternal uncle. The latter was not helpful at all. Everyday after my training till five in the evening, I would carry a loadful of rice from Bandel to Naihati and earned the cost of my living from its sale. Under such stress and strain I could not complete my training at the power loom. It ceased after three months. I met the officer who helped me in getting this opportunity and explained my difficulties to him.

Returning to Bethuadahari I worked for some time as a day labourer. A neighbour worked at a printing press in Santragachi. I implored him to get me some work. It was so difficult to carry on as a day labourer. After a month he told me to go to Calcutta where he had fixed some work for me. It was 1968. This is now I first joined ruling work in daftaripara.

My first initiation to ruling work was at a shop where I received only food and clothes for the first six months. A monthly payment of Rs.30 was received by me when I was found to be suitable for this particular work. After a year's work I suffered from anemia for some time. The owner of my workshop was troubled by financial difficulties. He asked me to find work elsewhere.

I worked at two places for short periods. The Hindu owner of the first workshop was irregular about payments. I had to quit. The second workshop was owned by a Muslim. I worked at a rate of Rs.3.50 per day. After nearly a year the owner told me that he was no longer in a position to give me regular work.

I worked next for four years in another workshop. It was on a monthly pay of Rs.60. Adding what I got for overtime work, my total earnings were Rs.120 a month. My father died in 1974 when I was working in this unit. I went on a month's leave. On my return I did not get back my job. The jamadar of the workshop was dismissed on the charge of stealing papers. The owner was fond of me. But he did not keep any of the old workers. I was one of them.

I worked in another ruling unit for about two years on Rs.120 a month. I had already registered myself in the Employment Exchange. For about two years I lived on unemployment dole given by the Left Front Government. This was followed by my work in a bindery owned by a Muslim. It lasted for seven years. The initial monthly pay was Rs.135. It was increased through the years to Rs.210.

While working in this unit I married a girl who was a co-worker. Once we went together to a cinema. Some other workers of our unit saw us when we were coming out of the cinema. All of them arranged our marriage. The girl was poor. I did not agree to her working outside after our marriage. I had to seek a better job since my existing earnings would be inadequate for the maintenance of two of us after marriage.



I had by then attained the standing of a nim kariqar. Along with an apprentice I took on contract the ruling work of a printing press near the Khanna Cinema. It fetched me a monthly earning of Rs.300. The contract lasted for only three months. The owner was not willing to extend his business beyond the circle of customers already known to him.

I returned to Patwarbagan for daily work. A ruling workshop in Nimtala gave me appointment at Rs.15 a day. It continued for eight months. I had a hand-to-hand scuffle with the workman-in-charge over the settlement of dues payable to me. I could then fix work at Patwarbagan on a monthly pay of Rs.270.

I worked in this workshop for a year. In 1985 there was a strike for more than four months. My employer agreed to increase my pay immediately by Rs.40 and then after six months by a further amount of Rs.10. But the unit was closed by the owner on the very day I went to work on this agreement. It was a policy of general lock out which the owners adopted.

There were numerous conflicts and scuffles during the period. The union leadership tried to organise some work with the machines which they had taken on contract. The owners were united. A court case was instituted. We never allowed the owners to take anything out of the closed units. I had some casual work on Rs.16 a day in the units run by the union.

An agreement was reached between the owners' association and the union of ruling workers. It was stipulated as part of this agreement that the owners would reappoint all previous workers. I did not return to my old employer. I could not forget and forgive his false play with me. I continued for some time in one small workshop on a daily wage basis.

I came then to the small ruling workshop where I am now employed. The owner has passed through many hardship. He knows me from my childhood. Once I did some domestic work in his household. I began at a monthly pay of Rs.335. It is now Rs.405. The owner is not affluent. He takes to frequent scolding in work matters. Still he is sympathetic to workers and helps them with small amounts in case of any urgent need. The unit employs four regular workers - one workman, two semi workmen and a child worker. Earlier the owner took part in direct labour. He does not work now because of ill health.

After my marriage I rented a shack close to the railway track near the Bagha Jatin station. My father-in-law visited us when our first son was born. Finding our dwelling conditions to be so squalid he took us to his house in Dattapukur. After some time my father-in-law separated from his son. He told me that we could go on sharing his dwelling place if I provided for his food and maintenance. I agreed to the proposal.

The house in Dattapukur was then sold by my father-in-law. Taking some money from me, he built our present house in Bamangachi. The plot cost Rs.2500 and the building inclusive of a 'bathroom' another Rs.3500. My father-in-law died some time ago. His wife lives with us. My elder brothers look after our mother. I send her Rs.5 to Rs.10 a month as and when I can.

Our family has five members -- two sons, my mother-in-law, my wife and myself. My weekly earning of Rs.100 is fully required to meet household expenses. We have rice in the day and wheat at night. We have fish on sundays. On other days we have pulses and vegetable. I give all the money for family expenses to my wife.

She manages everything with extreme care and economy.

My own expenses are on bidi and a railway monthly ticket. I buy the monthly ticket since I was once put to extreme harassment for travelling without tickets. My watch and shawl were seized by the ticket checker. My ticket does not cover the entire distance travelled by me. It is from Dum Dum Cantonment to Sealdah while I commute from Bamangachi to Sealdah.

My wife worked in a ruling unit for three years after our marriage. I asked her to stop outside work. It would be economically more convenient if she worked. It pricks my conscience to make her earn for the family. She still proposes to work for more earnings. I don't agree. She looks after the children. The eldest son is eight years and the younger four years. I may agree to her outside work when the children are grown up.

But for receiving the unemployment dole for two years, my card at the Employment Exchange has been of no avail. I have not received a single call. The card is no longer renewed by me. For days I have lived without food in this city of Calcutta. Once I stood in a queue for a job in military service. I waited till twelve at midnight. My height was found to be lower than the specified minimum. Some people got jobs for their work as Congress cadre. I kept myself aloof from political involvement.

I am a supporter of the CPM. But I do no party work. Being poor we are perpetually liable to all sorts of unforeseen liabilities. On holidays I do some household work like cleaning, marketing and helping the sons in their

studies. I go to a cinema only when I can. The Bengali films on social and family themes are preferred. The Hindi films casting actors like Dilip Kumar, Debanand, Rajendra Kumar and Dharmendra are also liked by me. I have my own transistor radio, I like songs.

I have an outstanding loan of Rs.1500/-. It was incurred when I gave money to my father-in-law for house building. I have taken a Panchayat loan. A repayment of Rs.60 is made every month. Under this loan I have got a sewing machine and Rs.6500. I hope to start a business in piece goods. I also wish to set up a grocer's shop to enable my wife to be an earner even while she stays at home. There are no prospects of a better future in the ruling business.

I reach my work-place by eight in the morning and return home by seven-thirty in the evening. In case of 'night' (overtime) work, I cannot return before ten at night.

I have received no religious initiation. My parents had a preceptor. I have found no trace of him.

Abani Roy had a boyhood full of hardship faced by many displaced families from East Bengal. As a poor young man he had no means to complete the training for a good job. As a ruling worker he has passed through many fluctuations and struggles with owners. His wife was a ruling worker before marriage. Abani's sense of prestige prevented him from allowing his wife to continue in work after marriage. Abani is now a nim karigar at a monthly earning of Rs.405. His family of five lives in acute hardship. Their house in Bamangachi was constructed by Abani's father-in-law after having financial support from Abani. Abani sees no future in



the ruling line. He supports the CPM. He tells us of his likes and dislikes for films and songs. Abani is planning to move to piecegoods business. He has received a Panchayat loan for this purpose.

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Nuruddin Laskar has his native place in the village Bauner Chak of Jaynagar in South 24 Parganas. They are now four brothers and one sister. One brother died at the age of two. Nuruddin's father has two brothers. The youngest brother earns by digging earth. The second brother is a pedlar of crude iron. Nuruddin's father is unemployed. He worked in cultivation and also did earth digging. He was incapacitated by a serious injury to his waist. Nuruddin's mother suffers from chronic gastric ailment. A doctor in Jaynagar has cured her to some extent. The father is about forty-five and the mother not yet forty.

Nuruddin is the second of their four brothers. The elder brother has set up a separate household after his marriage. The third brother works in a bindery of daftaripara. He does not yet earn enough to send any contribution to his village home. The fourth brother stays in the village. Nuruddin tried to provide for his studies. But the brother lacks proper aptitude. He does no work yet. Their sister has been married to an inhabitant of a neighbouring village. Her husband plies a rickshaw-van. They could give Rs.500 as dowry and an ear-ring and a nose-pin for their sister.

Nuruddin gives an account full of his experience of poverty and hardship. He is twenty-two. Nuruddin has the standing of a nim karigar (semi-workman). He is now employed in a khata-binding unit of medium size.

I came to daftaripara at the age of seventeen. Previously, I worked for a year in a shop which was making calendars. My job was to fix date slips on calendars. The shop was located in a street near the Ganesh Talkies. I used to get Rs.15 to Rs.20 a week. The owner was a Bengali Muslim from Bargachia, Haora. Once he took me to his village home on the occasion of a marriage ceremony. I also tried to learn the work of an electric mechanic. But the shops would pay nothing to a trainee. I could not work without payment.

I joined binding work as a 'boy' on a daily wage of Rs.7. I could go home once in two to three months. My mother came and wept for my hardship. I would give her some money for the village home.

I have worked at this bindery from the very beginning of my work in daftaripara. It has four regular workers -- one workman (the owner himself), a nim karigar, an apprentice and a child worker. My earnings increased over years from Rs.7 to Rs.8 and then to Rs.9 a day. I am now a 'nim karigar' working on Rs.14 a day. My weekly earnings amount on an average to Rs.100 inclusive of usual overtime payment. My family in the village is entirely dependent on me. I contribute between Rs.60 and Rs.70 every week. I can send more in the peak seasons of work. My father grows some vegetables at home. They have to buy rice, edible oil, potatoes, and onion.

We have a small pond. I am trying for fish-culture on a tiny scale. God knows what will come of it ! Our house has mud walls and tiled roof. It has two rooms.

A minimum amount of Rs.40 a week is necessary to meet my expenses in Calcutta. We are seven workers who live in the bindery and share a common kitchen. In the morning I have a loaf of 50 paise.

I can purchase my own clothes when I can spend more out of peak season earnings. I depend on the same peak income to pay the dues for the credit purchase of clothes for my wife and for my youngest brother and parents at the time of Id.

I married a year ago. My mother was keeping indifferent health. The marriage was arranged by my parents who thought that my wife would take charge of household work. They chose a girl of the village Nimpith. No adequate enquiries were made before their selection. The conduct and character of the girl was no good. She left one night with a young man who visited our place giving himself as a near relative of my wife. While leaving our home, they took away some cash, clothes and utensils of the household. On further enquiries we found out that the girl was prone to such looseness of conduct and conceived once before her marriage. The conception was secretly aborted.

I ceased all relations with my first wife. She moved a claim for alimony. I have divorced her and the talaq was duly recorded by a local gaji in our village. I married again after three months. No dowry was received by me in any of my marriages. My second wife is closely related to the wife of one my cousins (son of father's brother).

A house close to our bindery has a T.V. I see family plays on the T.V. I like stories depicting the kind of hardship and distress which is my daily experience. I saw one yesterday. I cannot properly recollect what was in the show. It was a play about a man's hardship, the kind of hardship one has to suffer with poor earnings. I go to a cinema only if someone pays for my ticket. I cannot afford to buy a ticket. The other day one co-worker took me to see 'Chota bou'.

After working hours I may see T.V. or have friendly conversation with co-workers who live in the bindery. I am working here for more than two years. If I had the money, I would go for some independent business, say of vegetables or rice. I don't like to work as a slave of my master who is the owner of the bindery. Still I am respectful about the 'company' (i.e. the owner). The 'company' also shows consideration by giving some advances in case of our pressing need. I have some debt in the village. It was incurred for buying rice.

As he goes to close his account, Nuruddin has tears in his eyes. His voice is choked up. He feels the burden of ceaseless poverty. He appeared to be a mild and tender person.

Nuruddin stresses on all his misery and distress. He breaks down into tears towards the end of his life-story. He is a nim kariqar of a khata-binding unit. The owner is not unkind to him. Still Nuruddin does not like at all the life of a slave working for his master. He is twenty-two and has to work hard to maintain all his dependents at the village home of Jaynagar. He goes home every week-end.



His hours outside work in Calcutta are often spent is watching the T.V. in a house adjacent to his work-place. Nuruddin expresses his particular liking for films dwelling on poverty and suffering of the poor.

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The native place of Farid Sheikh is in the village Karimabad of Magrahat police-station in South 24 Parganas. They are four brothers and two sisters. He is the second among brothers. Farid's elder brother is physically handicapped from his birth. He was born with only one hand. The two sisters are younger than the brothers. Their father has no work. He used to work in cultivation. For the last ten years he has been suffering from tuberculosis. He is better when he has medicine. He is not capable of doing any work.

Both Farid and his elder brother came to Calcutta when they were ten years and thirteen years respectively. In the village school where they read, a teacher tormented them for their inability to pay fees. One day Farid and his elder brother beat up this teacher and fled to Calcutta. The elder brother stayed in Dharmatala and Farid in Keorapukur.

Farid's elder brother went to distant places like Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta. He learned signboard painting. This elder brother now lives in Calcutta and works as a signboard painter. He has to move from place to place within the city and its suburbs in search of work. The elder brother married three years ago. He has one son. They all belong to the joint family in the village.

On his arrival in Calcutta at the age of ten, Farid went to a man from their village. This man had a tea shop in Keorapukur. Farid began work in a cycle repairs shop. He was in it for six months. Farid was given no money, but only his daily food. Leaving the cycle repairs shop Farid worked for one and a half year in a tea shop. They also gave him food and a few clothes, and no money. Farid then joined a grill workshop. He was given a monthly pay of Rs.90 and food.

It was said by many that welding work would damage Farid's eyes. He was also afraid of working always with machines and tools operated by electric power. Farid left the job after two and half years.

Leaving the grill workshop, Farid went to his own village. He returned after a month and joined the work of selling mudi (parched rice) at a shop in Sealdah area. Farid worked in this shop for one and a half year. Before joining the mudi shop he worked for a few days in a ruling unit. Farid was about sixteen when he returned to the same ruling workshop. From then on for the last ten years Farid has been a ruling worker. We can take up his own account from this his point.

Whether before or after joining this ruling workshop I have always worked with owners who are Hindus. For the first two years I worked for food only at the ruling workshop. My monthly pay was fixed at Rs.65 after two years. The pay increased by ten rupees each year. My present pay is Rs.375 a month. I am now a nim kariqar (semi workman). This unit employs three regular workers -- a workman, a semi-workman, and a boy. In addition the owner is also a direct labourer.

I get Rs.90 every week. My weekly contribution towards family expenses amounts to Rs.60. I commute daily from my village home to Calcutta. An amount of Rs.49 is needed to buy the monthly ticket for train travel. I leave home at 6.30 in the morning. The duty hours begin at eight in the ruling workshop. I am usually late by an hour. This has to be made up by working for an additional hour in the evening. I cannot be back home before nine-thirty. I go to bed by eleven at night.

There are eight members in our family. My elder brother contributes not more than Rs.20 a week. We have no lands for cultivation, nor even a small pond. The household members take care of other people's cows and goats for very small returns. I don't know the work of cultivation. We live in the homestead left by my grand father. We have none to help us in our poverty.

I have not married yet. The question does not arise because the family is already too big to be maintained on our present earnings. Our neighbours often tell my parents to arrange my marriage. I am against the idea. I have neither the means, nor a room of my own. We have only one room in the house. A year ago we could arrange the marriage of one sister. We could give nothing to the groom. We had to spend about Rs.1500 for giving a wedding feast. My brother-in-law (sister's husband) does bidi business. The youngest sister remains unmarried.

On holidays I wash my clothes and have some sleep during the day. I have my own transistor radio. I purchased a tape-recorder. The cost was shared with another friend. We used to listen to Hindi and Bengali songs while doing ruling work. I have no money for repairing the tape recorder. It is lying for a long time in the repair shop.

Once I went quite often to see a cinema show. This was when I lived in Calcutta. It is no longer feasible because of my lack of means. Further as a daily commuter I have no time to spare for going to a cinema. I liked the films dwelling on the themes of family life.

During the last ten years I made two attempts to shift to work in an offset unit. In the first case I had differences over payments. I was also involved in an accident. The owner of the press arranged at his cost for my treatment in a nursing home. He also asked me to join after I was fully cured. I did not return. The accident appeared to me as an evil omen. This press was located in the Park Circus area. I had a monthly pay of Rs.300 in this press.

I worked in another offset press in Kankurgachi for eight months. There was too much work. At times I had to work almost continuously for thirty-six hours. Falling ill I went to my village home. When I returned after a fortnight the owners gave me all my dues on account of pay and overtime allowances. But they did not take me back for work. They gave me a monthly pay of Rs.400.

I returned to ruling work. I have very few friends. There is nothing to speak of my involvement in politics. An uncle is a CPM worker. I support the same party. No one knows however the party in whose favour I cast my vote. I vote according to my liking on the particular occasion. I can never go to any distant place for travelling. I receive no payment for the days I don't work. I'll have no food tomorrow if I am absent today from my work.



Farid Sheikh has worked in several activities from his early boyhood. His present earnings as a nim karigar of a ruling workshop are insufficient for the maintenance of his village household of eight members even at a level of bare subsistence. Farid has made several futile attempts to shift to a job in offset printing. His life story presents a case of helpless misery.

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Zainal Huda works as an apprentice (sagred) in a book-binding workshop. Zainal has worked in several binderies through the last two years. Zainal is now sixteen. His native place is in the village Majherhat of Baruipur in 24 Parganas (south). Previously, he worked in a tailor's shop in Baruipur. Zainal also worked earlier in the cultivation of their own lands. He gave up studies while reading in Class I.

They are six brothers and two sisters. Zainal is the third among them. The eldest brother carries guava, amra (hog-plum), olive and tamarind to Calcutta and sells those things in the large city market. The second brother works in cultivation. None of them is yet married. The sisters are younger than all the brothers. The economic condition of the family pushed Zainal to Calcutta in search of earning. They have one bigha of rice lands, a pond which is shared with others, a goat and a milch cow. Their house has three rooms built of mud and pantile. Zainal's own account of his work in daftaripara goes as follows.

My father got in touch with a fellow-villager who had been working at a bindery in daftaripara. On my father's request, this man brought me to daftaripara. I started work in a bindery where the weekly pay was Rs.30. I could not work on such low earnings, and left within a few weeks. I worked for three months in the bindery which I joined next. I received a payment of Rs.60 a week. I stayed in that bindery and cooked my own food after ten at night. The working hours were from eight in the morning to ten at night. After three months I went to my village home for one day. I was sacked for a day's absence from duties. I joined then a bindery which gave me a monthly pay of Rs.200. Every evening I returned to my village home after work. The weekly payments were irregular. I had to quit this bindery. I came to work in this present place of my employment. It is a book-binding unit employing five regular workers -- one workman, two semi-workmen, one sagred (apprentice), and a boy. The owner does not take part in direct labour. He is a Hindu. My present pay is Rs.60 a week. It comes to a total monthly earning between Rs.280 and Rs.320 inclusive of overtime payments. I work as an apprentice.

I rise from my bed at five in the morning. I have to catch the train at seven. It takes an hour to reach the railway station from my home. I have rice before leaving home. I also carry rice with me for tiffin. When it is not possible to bring tiffin from home, I have my food in an eating house of this locality. I can return home by eight at night. I go to sleep not before ten.

I contribute Rs.45 a week towards family expenses. My own weekly spending lies between Rs.25 and Rs.35. One tiffin of four chapatis and pulses costs me a rupee. I see one cinema show every week. I go along with friends to a cinema hall in Baruipur.

The cost of ticket and other allied expenses come to Rs.5 for each visit to a cinema show. I like to see Bengali films (Zainal says 'books') like 'Gurudakshina' and 'Amar Sangi'. During festivals and religious congregations I go to relatives like my maternal uncles, my father's sisters and also my mother's sister.

I don't know the amounts contributed by my elder brothers towards family expenditure. We have about four and half maunds of rice from our lands through a year. We held before a lot of lands in sharecropping. Now the babus have taken back all those lands. They are now residents of the village. We have only one bigha of land. Rice and vegetables are grown on these lands. Some preparations are going on to build new rooms in our house. My elder brothers will marry after the proposed construction is effected.

Our village has the provision for electric supply. We have got no connection in our house. I go to a neighbour's house to see T.V. on sundays. At times I am not allowed to go in. I am told that there will be no good shows ('books').

My father and uncles are four brothers. One uncle works at a hotel in Baruipur. Another uncle runs a cycle-rickshaw. A third uncle works in cultivation. We get things on credit at the grocer's shop. The usual purchases are rice, wheat, pulses and sugar. My father bought three wrist watches. The watches are used by me and my two elder brothers. I use a watch only on special occasions like attending a marriage ceremony or a visit to notable spots and places of amusement (e.g. a fare, a cinema). I have two shirts, two trousers and two lungis. This year I received an annual bonus of Rs.50.

My father and elder brothers work for CPM. Two weeks ago my father had a loan of Rs.1000 from the Panchayat. This money has been partly used to meet the consumption needs of our household. Floods are quite frequent

in our area. Our homestead is situated in low lands. In case of heavy floods we have to move to shelters provided by the government. We can return home when the floods recede.

My father often purchases the clothes required by me. He takes care of the entire household. My eldest brother asks me not to give much of my own earnings to our father. My mother loves me most. My father has two vices -- drunkenness and gambling. He has wasted in gambling even the amount of my family contribution which I gave him last week. My mother and elder brothers often rebuke him.

While going home on Saturday I often take a packet of sweets. One of my younger brothers reads in Class VI and another in Class V. They often seek my help for having their books and exercise books. Their private tutor is paid Rs.30 a month.

My employer pulls me up for my faults at work. So does the head workman of the bindery.

At the age of sixteen, Zainal Huda works as an apprentice in a book-binding unit. He was pushed by the poverty of his family to go in search of some earning. He is now a daily commuter to Calcutta from his village home. They have some returns from own lands. Zainal's father and elder brothers are CPM workers. It fetches them some facilities. Although Zainal has to work for some earning at an early age, his life is not bare of all pleasure and entertainment.

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Naren Das comes from his native place of Madhya Sibpur. This village is about forty minutes' walk from the Gocharan station on the Jaynagar line. Naren is eighteen (1988). His elder brother has set up a separate household with his wife. Naren lives with his mother.

Naren has no clear memory of his father. He died when Naren was a child of three. Naren knows that father worked in cultivation. After her husband's death, Naren's mother brought up her children by working as a maid-servant in Calcutta. She was forced to work as an earner since the time her husband had fallen ill. She works no longer in domestic service. Naren and his mother stay in their village home. She now lives on Naren's earnings. Naren's elder brother is employed in a ruling workshop of daftaripara. Naren is now an apprentice (sagred) in another ruling workshop. He gives the following account of his life and work.

I came to work in 1982, when I was twelve. I began work at a workshop in Patwarbagan. I received a monthly pay of Rs.30. The owner gave me food. I had to work for very long hours day and night. I was allowed to go home after a month when I received my pay and could take it home. I worked in this unit for six months.

The owner of the workshop which I then joined gave me a monthly pay of Rs.90. I was given no food. I worked in this unit for one and a half year. My pay increased to Rs.110. It was very difficult to meet all necessary expenses. My elder brother ceased giving us any help. I was in need of a better job. My mother came to Calcutta and requested the people she knew, to help me in the matter. It was through their efforts that I could join a

workshop on a monthly pay of Rs.200. This unit was owned by a Muslim. I worked in this place for two and half years. My pay increased to Rs.230. I left the place because the company (i.e. owner) scolded me in filthy language.

I moved to the workshop of my present employment. The unit has five regular workers including the Muslim owner. Of the four hired workers, one is a workman, one semi-workman, and two apprentices. My elder brother worked earlier in this unit. He requested the owner to give me a job. I have a monthly pay of Rs.300. I get an amount of Rs.70 every week. I give my mother Rs.45 a week. My own weekly expenses are about Rs.25. It covers my bus fare and what is spent on tit-bits of food which I have in the train. A few rupees are often given to my mother for the purchase of fish, oil etc. This is in addition to the amount given to her for the week. My mother rears a milch cow and has some earnings from the sale of milk. This is how she tries to meet our household expenses.

We have no arable lands. I read upto Class V. All my uncles on the father's side are dead. My maternal uncles live in Baruipur. There is none to look after us in our want and distress.

I start for my work-place at six in the morning. The duty hours begin at 8 A.M. It is about nine at night when I return home. My schoolmates are continuing their studies. We are not friends any longer. In case of a meeting we have cordial exchange of words. I stay at home on holidays. I move about in the village. I also go to the playground. Occasionally, I may earn a few rupees by doing some sundry work here and there.

I have an elder sister. She lives with her husband in Barasat. Her husband has a small workshop for lamp-making. He has not seen the extent of our privation. We tell him nothing. He comes rarely to our house. I go to my sister's house from time to time. My elder brother has two daughters. He gives no money to my mother. We don't talk with each other. My sister-in-law (brother's wife) does not say a word to my mother. The elder brother has built his own room just by the side of our house. My mother went to talk with my sister-in-law who did not care to respond.

The owner behaves well with me. However, he offers no financial assistance to me even in case of an urgent need. There is none to help us with money. We get a week's credit at the grocer's shop. The dues are cleared every week.

I have a transistor radio at home. A cassette-player was purchased by us, the cost being shared half and half by my elder sister and myself. Before her marriage, the elder sister also worked in a ruling unit. It is in my possession since my sister's marriage. My mother listens to the radio. She cannot operate the player. I try to keep the cassette-player in proper order. I have seven cassettes. Most of them are plays like 'Raja Harishchandra', 'Gangaputra Bhisma', 'Palki Chale Re'. The three other cassettes contain shyamasangit (i.e. the songs of worship devoted to the Goddess Kali), Manna Dey's songs, and Hindi songs. Once in a fortnight I go to another house to see T.V. They are very rich people. My visit is not liked.

Our workshop rarely goes for overtime work. After receiving the annual bonus I bought a bicycle. It helps movements in and around the village. On the occasion of the Puja, I brought a sari for my mother

and gave clothes to the daughter of my elder sister. I don't regularly purchase lottery tickets. They don't get you an award.

I have no relation with political workers. I don't stay in the locality on an election day. All parties want you to be on their side. You cannot satisfy them all. I go away from the village for work in cultivation.

During the Pujas I go to many places to see the images of Durga. I have a desire to send my mother on pilgrimage to Puri. There is an arrangement covering transport and cost of food and lodging at Rs.100. I wish to avail of this arrangement for my mother.

Naren Das was only three years old when his father died. Naren and his elder brother were brought up by their mother who worked as a maid-servant after their father's death. Naren had to work for earning from the age of twelve. Now at eighteen he works as an apprentice in a ruling workshop. His elder brother married and ceased all relation with Naren and his mother. He also works in daftaripara. Naren is full of concern for the well-being of his mother.

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Sahidulla's native village is Uttarkusum of Magrahat in 24 Parganas (south). He is fourteen (1988). He works as an apprentice in a ruling workshop of daftaripara. Sahidulla stays in his work-place and cooks his own food. He has rice, pulses and boiled potatoes. At times he also has vegetable. He goes to his village home every saturday.



Sahidulla has three younger brothers, and parents in his village home. He has two elder brothers. The eldest is employed in a ruling workshop of daftaripara. Their next brother lives in Assam. He deals in nets used for fish-catching. The husband of Sahidulla's elder sister is also a ruling worker. He lives with his family in a village adjacent to Uttarkusum. Sahidulla's father is a quilt-maker in winter. He repairs umbrellas and works also as a carpenter. Let us then proceed to the account narrated by Sahidulla.

It is now one and a half year that I began work in daftaripara. I got no pay, but only food in the first workshop I joined. I worked there for six months. My work for four months in another workshop fetched me a pay of Rs.7 per day. For the last eight months I have been working in this workshop. It has four regular workers. One workman, two semi workmen, and an apprentice. I receive a monthly pay of Rs.230. It will be increased by Rs.10 after a year.

I cannot fix papers of full spread in the ruling machine. I can fix papers of smaller size. I am engaged more in the job of arranging papers in proper order. I have to do marketing for the common kitchen. It is also among my duties to bring tea and water for all the workers.

The owner of the workshop is the manager of a printing press. He comes here in the evening. The owner takes account of the day's work from Idris, who is the workman. After all this I start cooking in the common kitchen. The task of cooking is assigned to me.

Idris is practically the head of this workshop. He treats me very badly. There are days when the owner forgets to pay for the day's purchases. I request Idris to pay for the cost of materials to be bought for cooking. He does not pay the full amount necessary for the purchases. Idris tells me that I should go without food in such a contingency. I do the marketing and cook for them all. Today, I did not have my meal during the tiffin hour. I went to my brother-in-law (elder sister's husband). I did not tell him a word about all this. A worker of an adjacent workshop persuaded me to have some food. This worker often advises me to quit this ruling unit. He tells me that Idris will never have an apprentice like me. I am not ready to leave this workshop. True Idris scolds me too often. He even beats me at times. I was even made to replace at my cost a bag stolen from the workshop. It was used to carry purchases for the kitchen. The owner knows nothing about all this. I am afraid of telling him. He is always nice to me.

Idris gets angry if I don't bathe in the morning. But he himself bathes according to his own convenience. They neglect their own duties. They take full wages while working for a part of the day. The owner does not know what is going on. He tells the workers to carry on for their own sake. The owner does not insist on having his own returns. There is more work in all other ruling units. Idris is responsible for this state of things.

I have to arrange the bed for Idris and also for another worker. They enjoy absolute freedom in the day to day running of the workshop. One worker tells me that Idris will certainly be sacked by the owner very soon. When Idris goes home, he comes back for work at midday. The owner does not know this.

I can cook rice and vegetable. I also make chapatis at night. When we have meat, it is cooked by Rahamat, a nim karigar. In the morning I have a few pieces of bread and vegetable in a local eating place. It costs me a rupee. The food for the midday meal is cooked by me in the late morning. We have rice at 1 P.M. It is about ten at night when we have our food. I can go to sleep between eleven and twelve at night. I have my own bedding. No mosquito net is used. This is a great bother because mosquitoes bite me through the night.

I never ask the owner to pay me more than my weekly dues. On request, he gives me an advance of ten rupees by the middle of the week. The owner is good. It is a Hindu company (i.e. owned by a Hindu). The 'company' never finds fault with us. He is very good.

Before joining the ruling workshop I worked at a tailor's shop for nearly three months. The tailor did not agree to my going home every week. He beat me on this count. I left in protest.

At present my own weekly expenses amount to Rs.30. I make a contribution of Rs.20 to my village home. I go home on Saturdays. The family takes good care of me. My parents are full of love for me. Indeed, all efforts were made to enable me to continue my studies. I had no mind for studies. This is why my elders were forced to send me for work.

Our village household has six members. We have no lands of our own. My father cultivates about three to four bighas of lands taken from others. He raises rice, wheat, potatoes, onions and tomatoes on those lands. We have no ponds, nor a cow or a goat. My ~~eldest~~ brother spends sixty to seventy rupees to provide for the week's purchases of the village household.

The second brother comes from Assam once in a year. Our house has two rooms. It is now a year that the roof has been tiled. Earlier it was thatched with straw.

I have younger brothers at home. Every saturday I take for them biscuits of five rupees. I buy my own clothes. I have two lungis, two genjis, two shirts and a trouser. It cost me Rs.150 to make a shirt and a trouser.

There are some workers of my own age in the adjoining workshop. I go with them to various notable places in Calcutta from time to time. I don't go to cinema shows in Calcutta. On sundays if there is any work at the village home, I take part in it. When there is no work, I go to see a cinema show. Some young men of my age in the locality come with me. I also go alone to a cinema. The visit to a cinema costs seven to eight rupees for the ticket and allied expenses on tit-bits of food. We have no radio. I have no opportunities to see a T.V.

A moulavi asks me to offer prayers (namaj). I have not yet learnt how to do it. I have no fear of supernatural beings. Nor am I afraid of allah. It is said by all that one should not climb trees at night. I don't care for such warnings. Our village has a large burial ground. There is a big banyan tree within this graveyard. I have climbed it at night without any frightful experience.

Sahidulla is only fourteen. As an apprentice of a ruling workshop he is still a learner through direct labour. In addition, he has to cook for the common kitchen. The workman of the unit treats him badly. Sahidulla goes to his village home every weekend. There are other earners in his family. Sahidulla was sent to work because he had no mind for studies. Out of his own earnings he can buy



things for his younger brothers, purchase his clothes and have some entertainment. Some reactions of Sahidulla give us the impression of a boy-like mind. His position as regards the moulavi, supernatural begings and allah is noteworthy.

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Bindurani Basu is nearing seventyfive. In 1950 she came with her two sons from Rangpur in East Pakistan. Her husband came a year later. He worked in Rangpur as the rent-collector of a Zamindar's estate. Coming to West Bengal, he used to give private tuition to primary students. He also worked in a goldsmith shop. The shop-owner gave him daily meals. A nasty accident of severe acid burn damaged the hands of Bindurani's husband. He was disabled from doing any work. He died after three years.

Coming from Rangpur in 1950 Bindurani lived with her two sons in a rented house ~~in a rented house~~ in Belegkata. The eldest son was nineteen and the younger sixteen. While in Rangpur the younger son passed the Matriculation examination. He did not continue his studies because Urdu was the compulsory medium of education. The elder son read upto Class IX. He got work in a printing press. The younger son could be fixed at a hosiery factory in Sobhabazar. They are still working in the same units.

During the early phase of their migration to West Bengal, Bindurani had to run her household in extreme hardship. There was no improvement even when her husband

joined them a year later. All her ornaments were sold to maintain the family. Five years after their migration to Calcutta, Bindurani arranged the marriage of her elder son with a girl whose family had been displaced from Jasore after the partition. Within a year after his marriage the elder son set up a separate household with his wife.

Bindurani shifted to another house with his younger son. A monthly rent of Rs.16 had to be paid for the house. Once being caught up in extreme economic difficulties, Bindurani was unable to pay the house rent. She requested the elder son to shift to her house with his family. Bindurani expected that the elder son would bear at least a part of her burden. Within a month they turned Bindurani and her younger son out of that house.

Bindurani moved to Dankuni with her younger son. She had already started coming to daftaripara for work. Let us take note of her own account from this point.

A married woman of our native place in Rangpur worked in this locality of binderies. She brought me to do stitching work. I learned work in her company.

The younger son lived with me at Dankuni for three years. I arranged his marriage with a girl whose family lived in a refugee camp. Soon after their marriage my younger son's wife wanted that they should shift to the refugee camp. My son did not move to the camp. He rented a separate house.

I lived in Dankuni for many years. I earned my own livelihood from work in daftaripara. The neighbours in Dankuni looked after me. The landlord of my house

treated me very kindly and tried not to put me in any difficulties.

In the meanwhile four children have been born to my elder son. Indeed, his eldest son is married and has his own separate household in Sodepur. My younger son has two sons and a daughter. I was living on my own at Dankuni. The eldest grand-son and his wife told me to stay with them. Considering my age I thought it would be difficult for me to go on living alone for a longer period. I left the house in Dankuni.

I now live by turn either with one of the two sons or with my eldest grand-son. While staying with the elder son I contribute Rs.80. a month towards their expenses. In the family of the younger son I contribute Rs.60. I can make a larger contribution to the elder son's family since I have to incur no transport expenses while living in their Calcutta residence which is close to daftaripara.

I have no peace of mind when I live with them. It is now more than two years that I have left Dankuni. I can now realize my mistake. I have to live in conditions where a daughter-in-law continuously torments me with her chiding. It is the same in the house of any of my sons. However, the younger son has some real love and respect for me. There are months when I cannot work in daftaripara due to ill health. All expenses of my clothes, soap and hair oil are borne by me.

I can now earn about Rs.120 a month. I do stitching. The payment is on a piece-work basis. My previous earnings were higher. I can no longer work so much. I come for work at eleven or eleven-thirty in the morning. I return home between five and six in the evening. I am compelled to stop work earlier on

days when I feel unwell. I often go for work even on sundays to avoid the company of my daughters-in-law.

My elder son earns more than his younger brother. His eldest son works in watch-repairing. The second son works in a hosiery factory. His daughters have read upto Class VI. One of his daughters is married. Her husband owned a shop which subsequently failed. He now works in cultivation.

My younger son has two sons aged thirteen and ten. His daughter is fourteen. The children were born long after my younger son's marriage. They are still doing their studies.

I had no education. It was not in vogue those days. I can just read and write elementary Bengali. My father had his own arable lands which fetched him good returns. My father-in-law also had sufficient lands. My husband had his job in the zamindar's estate. My husband's father and uncles died within a year after our marriage. We could bring with us nothing of what we had in Rangpur.

I vote for hammer and sickle. Though initiated by a preceptor I find no time for regular worship. I like to listen to songs on the radio. My preference is for devotional songs. When I live with my younger son in Titagarh, I see T.V. in a neighbour's house. If possible, I never miss the 'Mahabharat'.

I suffer from gout and abnormal blood pressure. About eight years ago I had to undergo an operation to remove stones from my gall-bladder. My employer gave me some help. I have no savings. I have never earned enough to provide for saving.



Bindurani Basu has a life of continuous struggle for existence through more than four decades. She is seventyfive. Her sons and daughters-in-law take little care of her. She is quite hardened not to live in full dependence on them. Bindurani still does casual work in daftaripara to meet her own needs as far as possible.

\* \* \*

Hamida Khatoun is thirtysix. She has a son and a daughter. The son is twentyone and the daughter tweleve. Hamida is a Muslim by marriage. She came with her Hindu parents from East Pakistan in 1952. She was then barely six months old. Her maiden name was Arati Majumdar. They belonged to the village Sutsati of Barisal. Her father cultivated his own lands. He died six months after their migration to West Bengal. Her mother did no work for earning a livelihood. They settled in Ashoknagar. Some government aid was received by them after her father's death. Arati was brought up by a sister of her mother.

Arati's cousin (a son of her father's elder brother) gave her in marriage to his Muslim friend. They belonged to the same political party. The marriage was effected in 1963 when Arati was barely eleven years. She was taken to the big mosque of Zakaria Street where the marriage was formalised. Arati was very young and did not understand the full implications of what was being done. She did not protest.

Thus Arati Majumdar was converted to Hamida Khatoun. Her husband lived with her in a house in Narkeldanga. He worked in book binding and was an active member of the Congress Party. His native place was Jaynagar in 24 Parganas. Hamida came for work to daftaripara in 1968 when her son was born. We take up her own account from this point.

My sister-in-law (husband's sister) lived in our family. She did not give me enough food. She rebuked my husband for marrying a Hindu girl and said that their society would not accept me. My husband could not go against his sister's words. I had to experience too much torment and torture in their hands. Some people suggested that I could do sorting work in the binderies of Patwarbagan to make a living.

I came to work at the age of sixteen. My son was then a suckling baby. He was often carried in my lap when I came to work. My employer held a contract with the Ganashakti Press. I got a monthly pay of Rs.100. I worked for four years in sorting news-papers like 'Ganashakti' and 'Deshahitaishi'. The work was concentrated in two days a week. On thursdays we worked from twelve noon to ten at night. And on fridays the duty hours were from eight in the morning to five in the evening. Two other women worked with me. One came from Belgharia. Her husband did small trade in vegetables. The other was an old woman from Barasat. Her husband worked in a grocer's shop.

After nearly six years our employer's contract with the Ganashakti Press came to an end. I heard that much of the work was shifted to Delhi. We came to work in the employer's own

bindery. We did sorting work for the school text book 'kisalaya'. The monthly pay of Rs.100 remained unchanged. We asked for a pay increase and also pressed for regularity of payments. We were given no bonus, nor any tiffin allowance. We wanted payment and benefits at the current market rates.

The employer did not accept our demands. He decided to retrench us and gave us two months' time to find alternative employment. I became a floating worker on piece rates. The rate for sorting a ream of paper was between Rs.2.50 and Rs.3. The rates for stitching were between ninety paise and one rupee for every hundred format. I move around eight to ten binderies to get work. I have been following the same practice for about a decade. In months of fairly good volume of work, my earnings are between Rs.300 and Rs.350.

I live with my daughter in a rented house at Mallikpur. A monthly rent of Rs.80 is paid. The house is not provided with electric supply. We can have fish or meat only in times of quite high earnings. Usually we have rice and vegetables. I don't have beef, nor eggs or any other meat. My daughter eats beef.

Leaving home at eight in the morning I can reach my work-place in daftari para by ten-thirty. I return home in the train leaving Sealdah at nine-thirty in the night. I cannot reach home before eleven-thirty. I have no food at home in the morning. I get a rupee for tiffin at any bindery where I am working on that day. It is usually spent on mudi which I have for tiffin. The husband of my sister-in-law (husband's sister) has his own bindery in this locality. Sometimes I go to his bindery and do the cooking for the common kitchen. I have food only if I am requested to do so.

For the whole day my daughter stays with the other tenants of the house at Mallikpur. There is also the landlord's wife. After receiving the day's wage I buy some vegetables at the Sealdah market and take the things home at night. My daughter keeps the night meal ready when she has something to cook. There are days when no cooking is possible before I return home with my purchases. There is no certainty of work for me on each and every day.

Some years ago I had to undergo a tumour operation at Chittaranjan Hospital. I thought the tumour was in my stomach. I could have no food. I vomited blood. After seeking information from some people I went on my own to the hospital. I had to stay in the hospital for two months. I left my daughter in the house of a bindery owner known to me. She was asked in that place to do household work. She was not used to so much work. I started my work in the binderies the next day after I had been released from the hospital.

My son did not come to see me at the hospital though he was then in Calcutta. He lived away from me from the age of fourteen. He went to learn the work of a motor mechanic. He was in Mehediagan. My son read upto Class VI. I put him in a free school. I went to see him at his work-place. The master mechanic gave him food during the period of training. The owner also gave me ten to fifteen rupees when I visited the workshop to see my son. For the last three years I have no information about my son. He left for Bombay in 1985. He is now grown up. He has always been extremely hostile to his father.

I am separated from my husband for the last ten years. My husband's sister arranged his second marriage with their cousin (daughter of mother's brother). I



lived for some years in the same house with my husband's co-wife. He gave me nothing for my livelihood, I started work to maintain myself and my children. My husband went with his second wife to his native place of Jaynagar. I was also taken to the same place. Quite often I was beaten by my husband. I left with my daughter. This is how I came to live in the rented house at Mallikpur. My son was already in Mehedibagan to learn the work of a motor mechanic.

My husband no longer works in book-binding. He stays at Jaynagar. He has **parents** and brothers. At present my husband does no work. He gains his livelihood from the ownership of a pond and orchards. He is still in politics. His sister is married to a man who has his own bindery in this locality. I have talked about him already. From time to time I work in his bindery. This man has no children. He brings up a daughter of my husband's second wife. She will appear in the secondary examination.

Once I thought of sending my daughter to an orphanage. I made a petition. My daughter cannot be admitted because she has her parents living. I have taken no initiative for formal divorce. Nor have I claimed any alimony. Since I have to live by my hard labour, it is no use going for claims and cases.

After my marriage I went at times to see my mashima (mother's sister) who brought me up. The children of my cousins had grown up. Those days they came to see me in daftaripara. Now and then my maternal grand mother wished to see me. But on going to their place, I was not allowed to enter the house. I returned after talking with my grand mother from outside the house.

I have learned to offer prayers (namaj). I have committed to memory the sacred words after having them written in Bengali script. I observe roza for a month. All this is done not against my own wish. I believe it is my obligation to remain faithful to my husband's religion. I have spent twenty-five years of my life as a follower of the Muslim faith. I cannot abandon it.

I have the desire to have a house of my own. I should arrange for my daughter's marriage within three to four years. Not a single ornament has yet been made for her. I have no means. There is none to look after my daughter. No help is given by the local Panchayat. I don't want my daughter to work in binderies. I have good terms with the women who work here. Some are found to be victims of a loose moral life. Bad people are always around to seduce the women who are in poverty. Some Hindu women have left their religion to marry Muslim owners or workers.

I do washing and mending of clothes at home on sundays. If there is any demand, I come to work on sundays. I know sewing. If I had a sewing machine, my daughter could gainfully work with it. Can you get me a sewing machine ?

There is a radio in the neighbouring house. We can listen when they play it. I don't see T.V. Previously, I saw more cinema shows. With my present earnings it is not possible. My constant worry is how to feed my daughter in case of any break in my work. The landlord of Mallikpur is a Muslim from Bihar. He is Hindi-speaking. I cannot speak in Hindi, though I can follow when others speak the language. My daughter can speak in both Bengali and Hindi.

Hamida Khatoun lives a life of extreme stress and poverty. In her desperate search for a day to day living she expects no help from her husband. Still she believes it is her obligation to remain faithful to her husband's religion.

\* \* \*

Uma Das lives in Maslandapur which is her native home. She is the eldest of her two brothers and four sisters. The first brother works as an order supplier to medicine shops. Her father also did the same work. The second brother joined some service after passing the Secondary examination. Uma's father ceased to work as an order supplier ten years ago. He now looks after his own lands. He has three bighas of arable lands. Their homestead land amounts to five cottahs. The home is a pucca building with a verandah in front. The house is provided with bathroom and water taps.

Uma read upto Class V. She was married twelve years ago at the age of sixteen. Uma's father-in-law is also a native of Maslandapur. They are Brahmins. He adopted Uma's husband who was not a Brahmin and had the surname of 'Das'. At the age of forty-two Uma's mother-in-law gave birth to a son. Their adopted son was then aged nineteen. He lived in the care and affection of his adopting parents even after the birth of their own son. Uma was chosen by his father-in-law as the bride of his adopted son. Her husband had a shop for cycle repairs. The shop was set up by her father-in-law. The father-in-law worked at a jute mill in Alambazar.

Uma's husband died eight years after their marriage. The death was absolutely sudden. He started vomiting blood on a monday and died the following thursday. It was revealed in the clinical report that he suffered from blood cancer. It is now four years that Uma's husband died. She lives with her son and daughter in the house of her father-in-law. He and his wife are immensely aggrieved over the death of their adopted son. They treat Uma with the full recognition of a daughter-in-law. Their own son is eighteen. He has passed the Secondary examination. He is in search of a job.

Uma's father-in-law has some lands. Rice, jute and sesame are grown on those lands. In addition, her father-in-law earns regular interest on his bank deposits which include the savings left by Uma's husband. Uma's own account tells us more about the reasons for her working in daftaripara.

I felt extremely forlorn after my husband's death. The sense of loss was unbearable. I was subject to frequent "spells of tears. In this state of mind I felt the need to stay away from home for some part of the day. This is why I came to work in the binderies. My earnings are not indispensable for our household. I am more motivated by the urge to pass some time among other people who are my co-workers. When I do stitching work in this bindery as a regular routine, it helps me to keep my mind away from the ever-pressing grief of a young widow.

I was brought here by an elder cousin. She is the daughter of a sister of my mother. She is also a widow and had worked here from an earlier period. I used to receive thirty rupees a week in



the first two months of my work. It was raised to Rs.50 after two months. I still receive the same amount. It is now nine months that I have been working in this bindery owned by Abdul da. I don't move round to work on piece rates. The earnings may then be higher. But I think it improper to leave this unit where I learned work. Abdul da makes payment even for the days when I may not come to work.

A raised platform is situated half-way between the ceiling and the floor of our bindery room. Along with other women workers I sit on this platform to do stitching work. As the owner does not pay me less for a few days' absence, I also try to help him in case of shortage of men on the floor. I come down from the platform to give a helping hand. The cousin with whom I first came to daftari-para works in this unit. The other day she suddenly became unconscious in course of her work. I took her back to Maslandapur where she was examined by a doctor. All the co-workers were helpful. The owner was away in his village home. I never take advantage of the owner's absence to neglect my work.

I reach my work-place by nine in the morning. The railway station is ten minutes' walk from our home. I leave home by seven. But for a cup of tea or horlicks I have no other food in the morning. I eat some light snacks at nine in the morning and then the mid-day meal at 1 P.M. I bring all my food from home. No restrictions of food are followed by me. I often have boiled eggs or fried fish with rice for my mid-day meal. I don't eat meat. I never had it even when I was not a widow.

I return home by 7.30 in the evening. This is desired by my father-in-law. My mother-in-law also wants me to return as soon as possible. I never go to a cinema in Calcutta. Nor do I ever stay for night (overtime) work. If the train is late on any day my father-in-law comes to the station and accompanies me back to home.

My monthly contribution towards family expenses is Rs.120. I meet my own sundry expenses and buy the exercise-books, pencils and pens required by my son and daughter. My father-in-law has some returns from cultivation of own lands. A withdrawal of Rs.400 from the bank account is required to meet all expenses. My father-in-law suffers from fluctuations of blood pressure. Some regular expenses are necessary for his medicine and medical advice. My mother-in-law does most of the cooking. Before leaving home in the morning I light the oven and do a little cooking. We have fish on most of the days. Rice, pulses, fried and cooked vegetables are the other usual items of our daily food.

I go to bed between ten and ten-thirty at night. I have a separate room. The children sleep with their grandparents. As I don't stay home through the day, they spend more time with their grandparents. I don't insist on having them in my bed at night.

It takes me some time to fall asleep. The memories of my husband come to mind. I can feel the absolute helplessness of a widow. Our conjugal life was full of happiness. My husband had never been angry with me. I have cousins who are yet to get married. Some of them are my elders. At this young age (note that she is twenty-eight) I have lost my husband. My life is all bleak and void. I have to live in unending grief.

We have the best of relations among co-workers. Abdul da, the owner of the bindery where I work, once came to our house in Maslandapur. A cousin (sister) of my husband has a stall in Haora hat. Abdul da came to negotiate for its purchase. He wanted to have the stall for his brother.

The parents of my husband never tell me that being still very young I should marry again. It is absurd to think of any such possibility. I have obstacles of my own mind. Nothing like that can ever happen. I have two children. I don't want to ruin their future.

Not that I never feel particularly attracted to any man. I cannot express my feelings. I have to bury all this in my own mind. This is living in a kind of perpetual agony !

I don't listen much to the radio. The programmes of drama, yatra and film songs are more to my liking. Some people say that cinema shows may lessen my burden of grief. But their stories dwell on family affairs. They add to my sorrow. This is why I don't go to see cinema shows. I am not a viewer of T.V.

On sundays I wash clothes and do other household work. Sometimes I go to my parental home. I don't stay there at night. Several old friends come to see me. Some of them work as private tutors. Some others earn from their work on sewing machines at home. It makes me sad to talk with them. At the same time they are also a source of some relief for my loneliness.

On holidays I bathe my children for their ~~the~~ proper cleaning. I worship the Goddess Lakshmi at home. I am a disciple of Balak Brahmachari. My sole concern is about the future of my children.

Uma Das has not been pushed by purely economic reasons to come for work in daftarinara. Her life-story gives us a glimpse of the numerous contradictory pressures on a young widow looking for some human company to relieve the burden of her lonesome existence.

\* \* \*

The parents of Minati Das settled in Barasat after migrating from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Minati, her younger brother and a sister were born in Barasat. Minati is now thirty-two (1988). Her eldest brother works in railways, the second brother in the Electricity Board, the third brother in a private concern at Hazra Road. The youngest brother works at a hospital in Siliguri.

Their father came to West Bengal immediately after the partition of the country. He was an Ayurvedic physician. After staying for some time in a refugee camp, he could acquire a plot in an area which had been forcibly seized in Barasat by displaced persons. He built a house of mud-plastered bamboo laths. Minati's brothers have erected a pucca building in its place. Her eldest and second brothers passed the Higher Secondary examination. The third brother is a commerce graduate. The youngest brother did not pass the secondary examination.

Minati has three sisters. The eldest passed the Higher Secondary examination. The second sister is a graduate. Minati and her younger sister read upto Class VIII. The second sister worked as a teacher. She left the job at the time of her marriage. Later she got a teaching job again.



Leaving his family in Barasat, Minati's father often went to East Pakistan where he had lands in which medicinal herbs were grown. There he could also do some practice as a physician. But no money could be sent to his family. They lived in dire poverty. For days the whole family had to live on some gruel of wheat flour. Eventually, Minati's father could sell some lands in East Pakistan. He then came to be a stable resident of Barasat. He worked for some time in Sadhana Oushadhalaya. He died of cancer in 1982 at the age of seventytwo.

Minati was married in 1970. It was arranged by her father. Her father-in-law lived in Basirhat. Minati's husband worked at a cloth shop in Entally market. She lived with her husband in Calcutta. Two years after their marriage her husband married another woman. Minati informed the police. Her husband left his job and fled from Calcutta. He now lives in Bardhaman with his second wife. Minati keeps no relation with him. Her account tells us about her life and work.

I have been working in binderies for fifteen years. A woman of Khardah, who worked in this line, brought me to work in daftaripara. In the beginning I worked in book-binding units. I used to earn Rs.10 a week. It increased to Rs.18 in six months. There was a strike in book-binding units. I shifted to khata-binding. Initially I was paid a daily wage of Rs.3. I became more and more adept at stitching work through experience.

I shifted to piece work in several units. This yields more earnings. I move round ten to twelve binderies. We are like beggars. It means going in search of work from one bindery to another. The piece rates are fixed from one to two

rupees per one hundred formes. My weekly earnings vary between Rs.70 and Rs.100. I take no advance payment. It is more convenient to have the whole payment on Saturdays. I can better plan the weekly expenditure.

There are more Muslims in khata-binding work. This creates no difficulties. I can quit a place of work if it does not suit me. In our times and society one has to know to defend oneself for survival. I am extremely short-tempered. Earlier I was different. I don't know what has made me so short-tempered. If anyone tries to crack jokes at me, I hit back with a firm and curt reply.

I still live in that house in Calcutta, where my husband settled after our marriage. There is one room with tiled roof and a small veranda. I live with my son and mother-in-law who is nearly ninety. She is very much attached to me. The elder brother of my husband who stays in their parental house at Basirhat tried to persuade his mother to live with him. She refuses to leave me. All my in-laws are extremely considerate about me. I cannot live in Basirhat since it would require daily commuting to Calcutta for my work.

I have to pay a monthly house rent of Rs.25. It is with great difficulties that I meet the household needs from my earnings. I am allowed to make some purchases on credit both at the ration shop and the grocery. We can have fish only on days when I can afford to buy it. My mother-in-law is a widow and so a strict vegetarian. I don't have meat or eggs. My son has it when he visits his maternal uncles. Now and then I have a betel-leaf. I am very fond of drinking tea. I don't purchase clothes. My brothers and sisters make those provisions. The elder brother of my husband also gives us some clothes in a year. He has discontinued giving financial assistance for his mother

since his failure to persuade her to live at their paternal house in Basirhat,

My son will appear this year in the Secondary Examination. A monthly expenditure of Rs.275 is incurred for his private coaching. His maternal uncles bear this expenditure. I can purchase some books and exercise-books. My brothers provide for most of these needs. I can have exercise-books at a lower price straight from the binderies. My son wants to give private coaching to junior students so that he may help me to some extent. I don't agree to this idea; it will hinder his own studies.

It is about midday when I can come to daftaripara and start my work. I have to do all necessary household chores before leaving home for the work-place. I work here upto nine or half past nine at night. I can return home by eleven. It is nearly midnight when I go to sleep. I wake up by half past five in the morning. The market purchases for the household are done either by me or my son.

There is no radio in our house. I like to hear songs. I have no time. I coach four to five children in the morning. This fetches a little earning. My holidays are spent in doing household chores. On some holidays I go in the late afternoon to the house of my brothers in Barasat. I see there the film show on T.V. and return home after the show.

For me it is a life of continuous work. Where is my time for listening to music ? I feel like tearing those pages in which you are writing my account. Life is so detestable! The prices soar up every day. The salaries of government employees increase corresponding to such price rise. We cannot buy, nor do we have the minimum food necessary for living. This time I'll not cast my vote. Let it rot !

I wish, that my son has more education. I hope my brothers will go on helping. He is fairly good in his studies. The son is very much attached to me. Still I don't feel certain of my future. I hope to have a sewing machine which may enable me to earn at home. I have not yet succeeded in securing the necessary means for such a purchase. If my son looks after me after getting a good job, I shall confine myself to home life. My health is not well. I suffer from attacks of paralytic fits and gastric troubles.

Our neighbours are nice to us. They have full sympathy for my plight of living without my husband. I have received religious initiation from Bholananda Giri who lives in the Himalayas. He stays for three months in a year at a disciple's house in Kalighat. Some time back my burden of worries pushed me to the point of near insanity. I also had a nasty head injury in an accident. It required ten stitches to mend that injury. I am better after religious initiation.

I have no desire for a reunion with my husband. We have not met for the last fourteen years. He is disliked by all his near kins for what he has done. My son never utters his name. For this one man I have developed hatred for all males. Still I have to demonstrate conch-~~ch~~ bangles on my wrists and put vermilion on my forehead and through the parting of my hairs. My life is finished !

I am well acquainted with the women workers in daftaripara. They can give information about work. But for my own self-interest, I have no relation with any of them. Stop all this ! It is unbearable to talk of my own unhappy life.



Minati Das has an extremely arduous daily routine of work at home and at her work-place. She prefers piece-rate work in several khata-binding units. It fetches her more monthly earnings than what can be obtained from fixed daily wage in one particular unit. She compares her position to that of a beggar moving in search of help from one place to another. Her husband illegally married another woman fourteen years ago. This is not approved by his nearest kins who maintain good relations with Minati. Minati has no desire for a reunion with her husband. She is bitter about the signs of her identity as a married woman (eg. conch-bangles, vermilion). She bears a heavy financial burden to educate her only son.

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Sabita Mandal works as a scrap-picker. A very large volume of paper waste is turned out in the cutting process of the binderies. Such waste is deposited in scrap heaps. The scraps can be recycled as inputs of production in paper mills. It requires that the scraps are sorted into white and coloured pieces. This job of scrap-picking is mostly done by female workers. There are four to five units in daftaripara which conduct scrap-picking as a form of business.

Sabita Mandal lives in Belghoria. Her husband, Raicharan Mandal is a blacksmith. Their original home was in Tejgaon of the district of Dacca. They came from East Pakistan to Assam and went back after the establishment of Bangla Desh. But Raicharan could not get back his job in

a factory. They came again to West Bengal. Sabita worked as a maid-servant in one household in Belghoria and lived in its kitchen with her husband and children. Sabita's husband moved around in search of work. He sold wood which Sabita brought from Ultadanga. They rented a room on thirty rupees a month. They have four daughters. The youngest was born after they had come to West Bengal.

Sabita's husband got some money by hundi from Bangla Desh. This was on account of the sale of their homestead and some more lands. Sabita does not know the amount received by her husband. He bought three cottahs of land in Belghoria and built a house with walls made of mud plastered bamboo laths and tiled roof. It has one room and a small smithy.

Their eldest daughter was married to a man who ran a cycle rickshaw in Belghoria. His native place was in the Sundarban area. It is now three years he has left Belghoria. The eldest daughter lives in the family of his parents with her son of five years. They have failed to trace her husband.

Sabita got herself ligated after the marriage of their eldest daughter. In her own words, she did not want to have any more children after the marriage of her eldest daughter. Further, Sabita had already started working in daftaripara. Sabita said that anything obstructing her work would add to the severe distress of their family. It was seven years ago that the eldest daughter was married. Sabita Mandal is now nearing forty. Her own account gives us some measure of a life full of woes and privation.

It is now eight years that I have been working as a scrap-picker in daftari para. Initially, I got Rs.2.50 a day. My present daily wage is Rs.7.50. I get no payment for days when there is no work. Thus my weekly earning comes to Rs.45 since no wage is given for sundays. We receive payments on Saturdays. The owner may advance Rs.20 to Rs.25 in case of any urgent need of a worker. I can contribute Rs.30 a week towards household expenses. I need the remaining fifteen rupees for my own contingencies in case of bus travel and also for tit-bits to satisfy our grandson's child-like demands. My husband buys raw materials from Ultadanga to produce goods in his smithy. If he has earning we can somehow meet our minimum needs. In lean periods of his work we live in semi-starvation.

My youngest daughter is now eleven. The second daughter is sixteen and the third fourteen. We have no trace of the husband of our eldest daughter. Along with her son of five years, she is completely dependent on us. None of them does any work. We don't support their going for work outside the household. The youngest daughter reads in Class III. We have to incur a monthly expenditure of Rs.30 to provide for her private coaching.

I leave home very early in the morning to catch the train. The railway station is three miles walk from our residence. I wake up at four in the morning. I return home by 8-30 in the evening if the train runs on time. I cannot go to sleep before eleven at night. The arrangements for the next day's cooking are made by me the previous night. I do half of the cooking before I leave home in the morning. The rest is done by my daughters.

One woman of our locality brought me to daftaripara. She was a scrap-picker. I took up the same work. One can earn more in stitching. It is difficult to get an entry. Further I may have to work without payments for the first month. It is just impossible in our circumstances.

We have no provisions for the marriage of our daughters. Our earnings are no more than what we need for minimal subsistence. My husband never tells me not to come for work in daftaripara. His own earnings are so uncertain ! Still he always bears suspicion about my conduct in the company of males outside the household.

My husband is extremely irritable. He tends to bear down people who are known to be wrong-doers. I don't show anger to anyone. It does not become a three-penny worker of my position.

Sabita Mandal lives a life of extreme hardship and distress. Sabita's husband is not happy about her working outside in the world of males. He has to bear with it because of the uncertainty of his own earnings as a self-employed blacksmith. Since their migration from East Pakistan (now Bangla Desh) Sabita and her husband have always been in all sorts of difficulties in securing a sound livelihood. The whole complex of their existence holds out little hope of any future improvements.

\* \* \*

Hasnu Purkait lives in Khardah which is her native place. She is one rare example of a Muslim woman working as a stitching worker in daftaripara. Hasnu is twenty-two (1989) and still unmarried. Her father worked in a jute mill in Srirampur. He lost his job because of continuous



absence from the workplace. This was due to his habits of gambling and drunkenness. Hasnu's father and uncles were four brothers. All of them worked in jute mills. One uncle died. Another shifted to trading in wood and timber. The third uncle now works in cultivation.

Her father left his work when Hasnu was only two. She had an elder sister. Her mother tried to earn a livelihood by making and selling paper-bags (thonqa). The husband of a sister of Hasnu's mother helped them in their distress. It was his help that saved their family from complete destruction. Hasnu's father is now forty-two. He is still not cured of his addictions. He lives separately in a hut built by him in the compound of his original home which is inhabited by his family. The homestead and some more lands were left by Hasnu's grand-father who worked in a jute mill. The house has brick walls and tiled roof. The floor is not made of cement. All his four sons have their houses on the lands which they had inherited from their father.

The elder sister of Hasnu was married to a man of their own locality. This man is a cultivator. He helped his mother-in-law. Hasnu's mother died about ten years ago leaving behind Hasnu and her younger sister. The elder sister's husband has been afflicted with rheumatism. He can now do little work on his own.

Hasnu came to work in daftaripara four years ago when she was eighteen. We can take up her own narration from this point.

By the time I was eighteen, it was clear to me that relatives could not go on helping us indefinitely. I decided to work for an earning. A married woman of our locality introduced me to some binderies of daftaripara. She still works in this area. Her husband is an unemployed man. He worked at a factory in Asansol. Their marriage is an instance of a Hindu woman marrying a Muslim.

For the first year of my work in a bindery I was paid a daily wage of Rs.5. I joined then my present work place. It is a medium size khata-binding unit. I am paid on a piece work basis. In the busy seasons of peak work my earning comes to Rs.100 a week. In the dull period I have a weekly earning of Rs.60. I start work at nine in the morning. I return home at night by 7.30 in the evening. On days when we do overtime work, I cannot return before 9.30 at night. There are days in the peak season when I return home at 11.30 at night. I go to sleep at any hour between ten and twelve at night. It depends on the time of my return from the work-place. I do some household work and eat my night's meal before going to bed.

We are three persons in our family - my father, the younger sister and myself. The family depends almost wholly on my earnings. My father makes some casual earning as a toddy-tapper. When my father has such earnings, he may give us clothes. Our helpful uncle (husband of mother's sister) still provides us with clothes, particularly at the time of Id.

I can spend no more than my own earnings. My sister cannot come for work. She has to stay at home to do household chores. We could live better if my younger sister had some earnings. Some relatives go on advising that I should now

be married. I am against this idea. My sister will be quite helpless in my absence, I believe her marriage should be arranged before I can be married. I always think on such lines.

I offer no prayers (namaj), nor do I observe roza. I can read Arabic. I have never read in a school. I can just read a little. My father bought a radio which is at our home. I like more to listen to Hindi songs. I see at least two cinema-shows every month. I prefer the Hindi films. I can understand Hindi. On sundays I visit a relative's place in the evening to watch the T.V.

I fell in love with a man working in this bindery. It was not reciprocated. Please do not press me to tell you anything more.

Hasnu Purkait is the rare case of a Muslim woman working in daftaripara. She is still unmarried. Hasnu's father is addicted to drinks and gambling. He can do no regular work. Hasnu has a younger sister. Their mother died ten years ago. She works hard. She can afford to have some recreation and entertainment outside working hours. Hasnu is no strict observer of religious practice and rituals.

\* \* \*

Shefali Ghosh is thirty-six (1989). Her parents came from East Pakistan after the partition of the country. They came with two sons and two daughters. Shefali was born in West Bengal. Her father was a milk-trader. He died in 1972. Her eldest brother works at a military establishment. He set up a separate household after his marriage. This was in 1969. Shefali and his second elder brother had to give up

studies due to financial difficulties. She had read up to Class VIII. The second brother had a fruits shop. Because of his long illness the shop failed in business. He is now a hawker in trains.

Shefali's father could arrange the marriage of all her daughters before his death. Shefali was married two years before her father's death. The marriage was negotiated by the husband of her elder sister. He worked in a board mill. Shefali's husband was employed in the same board mill. Shefali was seventeen at the time of her marriage. Her husband had a monthly pay of Rs.150. She came for work to supplement their family earnings. They live in Ranaghat. Their own house of mud walls and tiled roof is built on three cottahs of land. They could purchase the land at Rs.225 a cottah. The house has one room and a small veranda. They have three daughters. Let us then take note of Shefali's own account.

I had a friend in Chakdah. She worked in daftaripara. Her husband deserted her. This friend helped me in getting work. In the beginning I worked at a book-binding unit on a daily wage of Rs.3. I shifted to this khata-binding unit after some time. I have been working at the same place for more than a decade. I can earn Rs.90 to Rs.100 a week in the busy periods of peak work. During the lean period, my weekly earning does not exceed Rs.70. I leave home at eight in the morning and return home by eleven at night. My husband does not come to the railway station even when I am quite late in returning home. Our house is twenty minutes' walk from the station.



The mill, where my husband works, often remains closed. During such periods he works as a salesman of soap, hair oil, and exercise books. He purchases soap and hair oil at wholesale prices in Ranaghat. He comes to a bindery in Baithakkhana Road for the wholesale purchase of exercise books.

During the busy seasons of my higher earnings, the cost of our weekly purchase of rice and some other items can be fully met from my income. When I have lower earnings due to lack of work, my husband has to bear a greater burden. Sometimes he has to draw upon the capital fund for his trade. The fund is not more than Rs.500. He can somehow manage as he deals with shops in Ranaghat. The shopkeepers know him well.

There are now four members in our household - my husband, two daughters and myself. We have rice for every meal. We don't eat wheat. We can have fish two days a week. I have rice every morning before leaving home for the workplace. I also bring rice with me for tiffin at 1 P.M. In case of night (overtime) work I have snacks at six in the evening. The bindery owner gives me 80 paise for this tiffin. My usual food in the evening is muri (parched rice).

There was a total expenditure of Rs.13000 for the marriage of our eldest daughter. My brothers and some other relatives helped us with Rs.7000. We could give gold bangles to our daughter. My brothers gave her an ear-ring and a ring for the groom. On the wedding day the groom was accompanied by fifty persons. On the whole, we had to arrange a feast for about 250 persons.

My eldest daughter read upto Class X. She lives with her husband in Halisahar. Our son-in-law is a cloth trader. The second daughter is fifteen. We can no longer bear

the cost of her studies. She read upto Class VIII. The youngest daughter is just five years. We have engaged a private tutor for her studies. He takes Rs.15 a month. She has been brought up in the care of her elder sister. On holidays I cook at home and take some rest.

My employer gave me an advance of Rs.500 at the time of my daughter's marriage. My brothers and sisters also helped in response to my persistent request. They don't usually help us in any other emergencies. I am quite involved in family life. My husband bears no suspicion about my mixing with other men at the work-place. He often comes to daftaripara for the wholesale purchase of exercise books. He is quite familiar with my ways at the work-place. There has been more amity in our conjugal relationship since I started working in daftaripara.

I have the best of relations with my co-workers. We talk about the joys and sorrows of life. I know them much more than my neighbours in Ranaghat.

I listen rarely to the radio. Once in two weeks I go with my husband to see cinema shows at night. I like more the Bengali films dwelling on themes of social life. I have seen a few Hindi films. I cannot follow the language. It does not suit me to visit anybody's house in the neighbourhood to watch the T.V. I like to read books, particularly detective stories. It is a nice experience to read how the criminals are found out and punished. The pressure of my work leaves me little time for reading books.

I don't think about the future. The things will take their own course. We have no savings. It will take us a long time to arrange the marriage of our second daughter.

I have about fifteen betal-leaves every day. I travel without ticket in trains. It is impossible to afford the cost of a monthly ticket at Rs.72.

Shefali Ghosh presents the rare case of a woman worker who has a settled married life. The family consists of Shefali her husband and two daughters. Their eldest daughter is married. Shefali's brothers helped with money to meet the marriage expenses which were about Rs.13000. The burden of maintaining the family is shared by Shefali and her husband. Although Shefali finds little time for reading books, she expresses her liking for crime stories in which the guilty are detected and punished.

\* \* \*

The foregoing accounts cover several life stories narrated by male and female workers of daftaripara. We have noted already the general condition of child workers (Sen, OP 127 pp.24, 31-33).. It was not possible to get life stories narrated by themselves. They are not able to provide narratives on their own. The employers do not approve of their talking with outsiders for any length of time. They always remain busy with all kinds of work. Most of them are pushed to work by extreme poverty in their families. There are girls of the age between nine and fourteen who are found to work in the position of 'boys'. In addition to what has been said before about the child workers, some of the life stories, which we have presented above, cover the childhood experience of the subjects who had to join bindery work at a very early age. We may refer also to the detailed account of a day's work at Abdul's medium size khata-binding unit. It has significant findings

about Montu, the 'boy' of that workshop and his relation with her owner and other workers.

\* \* \*

### In Lieu of A Conclusion

The life-stories give us some impression of the cultural and religious habits of the subjects and about their choices between what they perceive as good and evil. All this is mixed with their accounts of extreme poverty. For most of them ten to twelve hours a day or even more are to be spent in work and arduous travel between their residence and work-place at daftaripara. Such long hours of hard labour are often required to save the workers and their families from starvation. Thus, any indications of cultural and religious practice may just occur marginally in the accounts narrated by workers.

As for their origin and background, the composition of the working people at daftaripara has immensely diversified through the last four decades. No traditional ties of culture and custom similar to that among localised artisan communities obtain for the bindery workers coming to work from different places and with various social background and religious faith. Nor do we find a clear articulation of capital-labour relation which can impart a common identity to the workers. Such a course of development is retarded by the heterogeneity of production and labour forms.

However, we must not ignore the evidence of amity and understanding among the labouring people of daftaripara.



The local population of the area including the resident bindery workers are mostly Muslims. Many non-Bengali Muslims are resident for generations in Patwarbagan. Several areas of the ward bear the definite impression of being an old Muslim locality with its mosques, eating houses, children's schools, kind of book-shops, libraries and clinics of Muslim doctors of either traditional or modern training.

Previously, the bindery workers were mostly Muslims. This is where a major change has taken place during the recent decades. The Hindu workers now constitute the majority. The Muslims still comprise the bulk of the area's residential population. Their co-existence with a Hindu majority of the working population from outside the area is seldom marred by any ill-will and conflict between the two communities. The riots of 1964 forced many Muslims to leave for East Pakistani (now Bangla Desh). Even during that period of communal conflict, the Muslims found daftaripara to be a relatively safer place. Both Hindus and Muslims currently appreciate the peace and harmony which is a characteristic feature of this locality.

We cannot readily stylize the complex of meanings through which the bindery workers shape their own life experience. Many of them desire to have some alternative means of livelihood. A wage worker often aims at owning a small bindery unit. Any such effort is seldom successful. Moreover, the workers who own small units are rarely free from poverty and hardship. The opportunities for moving to a different activity are extremely scarce for bindery workers. Thus, their urge for material improvement is hesitant and subject to a host of uncertainty and ambivalence.

Most of the life-stories descend to the very depths of misery and hardship in everyday life. There are moments of extreme distress with which the subjects never internally fuse themselves. Such instances of distancing are present in the life-stories. The moments can be traced in the wit and fun of the workers amidst their leisure-time gossip. In their appreciation of film songs, radio music, cinema and T.V. shows, the workers derive the satisfaction of acclaiming the triumph of their sense of good over that of evil. Even more concretely, we have the example of a child worker refusing to do overtime work without prior information about any such schedule of duties. Some other workers search for the heart of a heartless world in religious initiation.

We need not add more examples. The stories do not present all this as an empirical document. It may be more appropriate to sense those moments than to document them as readymade facts, since the manifestations are so various and indirect in their particulars. In this important sense, the present study in two parts is an attempt to evoke the necessity for extremely minute, molecular process of more and more meaningful analysis in every detail.

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